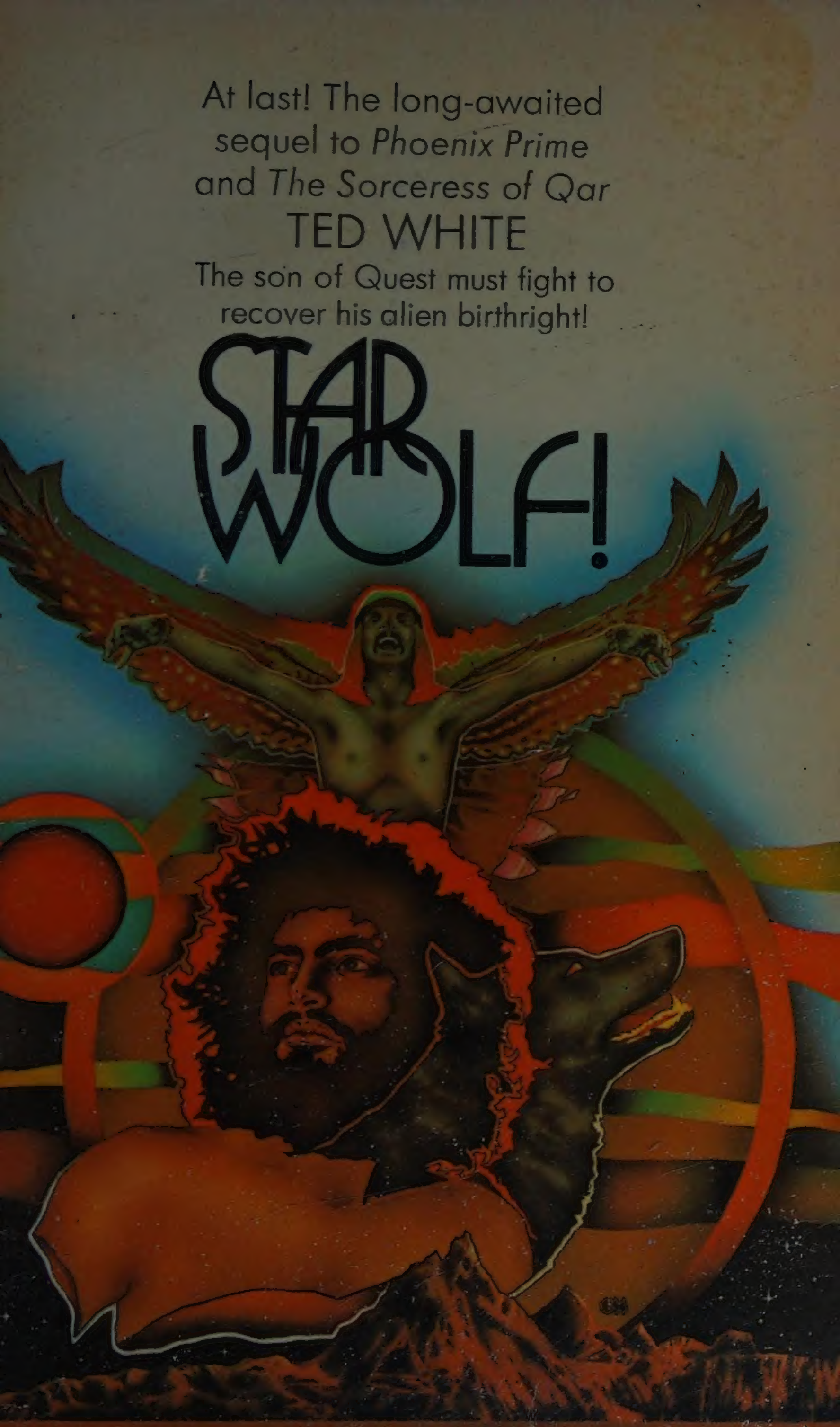
At last! The long-awaited sequel to *Phoenix Prime* and *The Sorceress of Qar*

TED WHITE

The son of Quest must fight to recover his alien birthright!

# STAR WOLF!



Never before published.

# THE WINGED MEN

Makstarn was caught unaware, his attention on the scene below. Something warned him, and he turned, to stare face to face with a hooded man.

Until that moment, he had not known what he would do: draw his knife, or flee. Now, in one smooth movement, he flung himself up and over the low railing, and down into the maze of vines which cloaked the side of the house. He had an instant's feeling of suspended time and motion as he seemed to float gracefully over the parapet. Then the vines snatched at him, until he was free, dangling, and he dropped the last distance to the ground—and a pair of sinewy arms were around him, pinning him.

Makstarn slumped and threw his weight forward, tossing his captor. Then he stopped, astonished. Climbing to its feet, the other was a winged travesty of a man. Two others launched themselves from the balcony above, and he could only draw his knife, and wait . . .

# OTHER LANCER SCIENCE FICTION YOU WILL LIKE . . .

**THE SHORES OF TOMORROW, by David Mason.** #75–217, 95¢.
*War across the time lines!*

**SPACE FOR HIRE, by William F. Nolan.** #74–778, 95¢.
*Dark and wacky humor, in the tradition of Vonnegut.*

**TAU ZERO, by Poul Anderson.** #75–185, 95¢.
*"The ultimate 'hard science fiction' novel."*
*—James Blish*

**CONAN THE BUCCANEER, L. Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter.** #75–181, 95¢.
*The latest adventure of the most popular fantasy hero of all time!*

**INFINITY TWO, edited by Robert Hoskins.** #75–166, 95¢.
*New stories by Anderson, Clarke, Silverberg and other masters of science fiction.*

Nationally distributed by Curtis Circulation Company. If not available from your local dealer, order from: Lancer Books, Inc., Dept. D, 1560 Broadway, New York 10036. Please order by book number, and enclose 10¢ extra per copy for postage and handling. No handling charge on orders of four or more copies.

# STAR WOLF!

TED WHITE

LANCER BOOKS NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK

# STAR WOLF

Copyright © 1971 Ted White
All rights reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

Part I originally appeared in the April 1971 issue of *Fantastic*, under the title *Wolf Quest*, copyright © 1971 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc.

Dedication:

This one's for Naomi,
who asked for it

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

# PROLOGUE

When Max Quest was catapulted into his adventures upon the world of Qanar—a world somewhere in the elsewhen of another reality, perhaps tangent to ours—he found himself in a bleak, heat-scarred desert.

He was naked, without clothes, tools, food, water, or shelter, and he found the direct light of the white sun blistering his skin.

The story of his first adventure, in meeting a once-tamed wolf, and in escaping with it across the mountains to the east, was told in *Phoenix Prime*. And in that book were recorded his subsequent adventures: his joining a nomadic tribe in the grassy lowlands, the rape of the tribe by raiders from the north, and Quest's rescue of the captured nomads from the stockade of the raiders' stronghold, the Fortress Rassanala. Max Quest moved on to other lands, and to other adventures, but he did not leave his hosts among the nomads without the one favor they sought of him.

He left the maiden Bajra ripe with child.

It was the blessing the nomads had prayed for: a gift from the Gods of new seed for their meagre inbred tribe. It was of little matter that the tribal leaders had been slaughtered by the raiders, that their herds had been decimated, that their life might now be even more precarious than ever before.

Max Quest had been sent among them, and he had favored them with his rich seed.

His son would surely prove a man among men, a leader of leaders. His son would surely be their salvation.

Perhaps.

And then again, perhaps not.

But this is his story, nonetheless.

# PART ONE

## Chapter 1

Makstarn had been conscious of his *difference* for as long as he could remember. He had been conscious of it because it had been drummed into him, repeatedly, by his mother, by those children who were his peers, and by the Elders. Each, of course, took a somewhat different tack.

"You, my son, are descended of the mightiest man who ever walked this land," Bajra had told him, when he had asked why he, alone of all the children, had no father. "Your father was a man greater than men. He came from nowhere, and he returned there once again. He came to father you and to rescue your people from bondage. He was a great man, and let no one speak against him."

Old Hekmight told a somewhat different story.

A wanderer he was, and a savage man. He knew nothing of weapons, and we had to teach him to handle the crossbow. But a fighter, now—that he was!" A fire would kindle in the old man's eyes as he slipped into his memories. "A savage fighter! A great, hulking dark man, shorter than most, and broader. Not, perhaps, a man to sup with often, but one to stand with in a battle! A strange one, he . . . And he sired you so that we might have in you some of his own fiery spirit. You must grow tall, lad, and you must walk tall . . ."

"Toad!" Jetarn screamed at him. "Squat, ugly toad!" It

did not pay to be too swift at the running games. It was not wise to show one's superiority over the other children. They had their ways of getting even.

"Toad! Toad! Toad! Black, ugly toad!" Jetarn yelled.

It was all he could do to keep from smashing his fist into that toothy, gaping mouth. He turned his back and walked away. Tears slid silently down his dusty cheeks.

He was then seven years old.

The tribe had moved across the river soon after recapturing its straggling flocks and gathering up what possessions remained at the old camp site unbroken and unstolen. The memory of Rassanala's raiders was too fresh, and it blunted their age-old fear of the ruins of Shanathor, the ancient city, across the river.

Before Makstarn had grown to a swelling in his young mother's belly, other nomads, drifting remnants of tribes caught by Rassanala's growing maw, also made their way across the river to the place not far from the ages-old ruins. By the time he was born, the tribe numbered thirty-seven.

It was a time of many new babies. Few of the women had been able to avoid the attentions of their captors, and even those who had, had found themselves moved by that primal force of nature which seemed always to work in times of disaster and war: the urge to mate, to couple, to conceive new survivors.

When Makstarn was three, the tribe had swelled in number to fifty-six.

When he was five, disease caught many of the older men, and some of the new babies, and when the tribe moved on to a new camping spot further down river, and to the south of ruined Shanathor, it's number was forty.

When he was seven, he was one of nine boys and six girls of roughly his own age. And he was alone, among them.

His mother was tall and slender, like all the nomads. Her hair was a rich and sun-burnished gold. She brushed it often and wore it in waist-length braids.

The older men—there were no young men—wore beards that varied from the brass of ripe grain to the white of advanced age, and rarely let their hair fall below their shoulders. They all stood proud and tall.

The other children, few older than he, were slender, willowy, supple like young reeds, their flaxen hair bright in the sunlight. Their legs were long, their hips narrow.

Makstarn could only glower at them enviously from under his dark brows. Already he stood a head shorter than his age-mates, his legs thick and stubby, his waist and hips the base of a barrel-thick chest. His hair—and it seemed to cover his body with a fur-like down—was jet-black.

It hardly mattered that he was stronger, more agile, quicker of reflex, and the fastest runner among them. He was *different.*

Difference is no indicator of value. Makstarn knew full well that his mother considered him to be different, and that in her eyes he was the better for it. And Hekmight and the other Elders, much as they might deplore his father's savage ways and try to make him into one of their own kind, they acknowledged that his difference was good, not bad.

But Makstarn could not live among the Elders, and his mother, he could easily sense, was prejudiced. For better or for worse, he relied upon the judgment of his peers.

He was a toad. He was dark and squat and ugly.

It was quite as simple as that.

And this is why, when he was seventeen, Makstarn needed only the flimsiest of excuses to run away.

The wolf came into the camp quite suddenly and unexpectedly. The watchdogs had made no protest, but they could hardly have been expected to, since both were sleeping downwind of the camp, near the flock.

Makstarn was sitting on a stone, staring silently into the fire, trying to forget what he had seen not an hour earlier. Across the fire from him, he knew, Rifka still sat

close by Jetarn, their manner innocent, their gaze upon him challenging and impudent.

He did not look up until, a flicker of movement in the firelight alerting him, he stared, startled, into the red-glowing eyes of the wolf.

It sat on its haunches at the very edge of the circle of firelight, and looked at him. Its mouth dropped open, and a long red tongue hung out. The animal yawned, its fangs sharp and white, then licked its chops and closed its mouth again.

Around its neck, Makstarn saw a narrow band.

He felt a strange pumping of blood within him, and time seemed seized and still. No one else had yet seen the beast. It was as though this creature had stepped across time and space to confront him alone.

He knew the legends of the wolf that had accompanied his father out of the desert. The wolf had fought at his father's side against the raiders, and had been slain. His carcass had still been at the campsite when the rescued nomads returned, and his mother had shown him one of its great fangs, which she had kept as a talisman. They had buried it among their own dead, she had told him.

This wolf: was he the ghost of his father's companion, an apparition come to haunt him in the night? He knew of the walking spirits who hunted peace on the land before departing for their rebirth in other places, but he had never seen one, and had never expected to.

The wolf moved slowly, but without fear, into the light. It was heading directly for him.

Rifka screamed.

Makstarn laughed, a short bark that might almost have come from the wolf, which pricked up its ears and looked back and forth across the fire.

"A wild beast!" Jetarn shouted, leaping to his feet. "I'll kill it!"

"You won't!" Makstarn said. "He's hungry. We'll feed him." He tossed a stew bone at the wolf's feet. The wolf bent to sniff at it.

His mother jerked awake to look back and forth at each of them, her eyes blinking away sleep. "Makstarn, my son—what is this animal? Where did it come from?"

"A wolf, Mother," Makstarn said. "Did you not recognize it? You've described it to me a thousand—"

"It came straight from slaughtering our flock," Jetarn declared. He waved his empty hands bravely, but ventured no closer.

The wolf set to crunching the brittle bone between its teeth.

The scream and the shouts had attracted attention at the other fires. Several older men came into the circle of light.

"A wolf!" one cried.

"What has brought it here?" asked another.

The third pointed sternly at Makstarn. "Is this your doing, boy?"

Makstarn tossed a piece of stewed meat to the animal. "I never saw it before in my life."

"It knows him!" Rifka said, her voice thin and high pitched. "It came straight to him!"

"A wolf," Bajra mused. "It *is* a wolf, but not the one that your father had . . ."

"*Like his father* . . ." The phrase passed from mouth to mouth.

Makstarn held out his hand. Cautiously, the wolf sniffed at his fingers. Then, suddenly, his red tongue whipped out and curled over Makstarn's knuckles.

The others gasped, but Makstarn did not flinch. "He is like a dog," he said. "He wants to know me."

"Why *you*?" Jetarn asked.

"Perhaps because I am the only one among you who does not fear or hate him," Makstarn answered softly.

"Because he's *different*," Rifka hissed.

"I heard that!" Bajra said. "It's true, my son *is* different. This is the sign, the omen. My son—"

"Mother. Stop."

The woman's face seemed to close in within itself. She lapsed into a silence that no one broke.

The wolf pushed closer to Makstarn, and looked up at him with large intelligent eyes. It seemed to know him; that was true. It seemed to sense an affinity with him. *Could* it be an omen, a sign of things to be? He reached out and grasped the wolf's collar. It was a braided leather of a sort he had never seen before. The animal stood quietly before him, as though awaiting inspection. It was a proud beast, quite unlike the mangy, lazy curs who belonged to the tribe. Makstarn felt a curious kinship for him; this was not an animal to be domesticated and put on a leash. This was a fiercely independent creature which chose to ally itself with men, not to be dominated by them.

"Well," asked Jetarn, "what are we to do with the animal? If we go on feeding him, he'll only keep hanging about, begging."

"It is not your problem," Makstarn said. "He has come to *me*."

"It is *our* problem," one of the older men corrected him. "You are of us, and thus he is of us, if you keep him."

"But where did he *come* from?" one of the others asked. It was Remial, a survivor of another tribe; one who bore the heavy weight of the fact that he had escaped capture only by an act of cowardice. When he spoke, it was usually in half-apologetic tones; when he was excited, as he was now, he whined.

Makstarn ran his hand over the wolf's heavy, shaggy coat. He sniffed. "By his dusty odor, I should guess he came from out of the desert."

"Everyone knows nothing lives in the desert," Jetarn said scornfully.

"Everyone knows that wolves do not live in these lands, either," Makstarn replied coolly. "And since that is true, and you have proven he did not come from out of the desert, the problem is answered."

"It is?"

"There is no wolf." He laughed again, causing the wolf

to prick its ears and look searchingly up at him. "And therefore, no problem."

Rifka stood, pouting. "There is no talking to him." She turned her back.

"Wait, Rifka! Where are you going?" Jetarn asked.

Makstarn felt a cold knife turn slowly in his stomach as he awaited her reply.

"To my mother's tent," she said with a toss of her head. "And you needn't help me find the way."

To that, Makstarn smiled.

"What shall I do with you, Wolf?" Makstarn asked quietly. They were alone before the embers of the fire; his mother had retired to the tent for the night.

A cooling northern breeze fanned his skin and set the coals to glowing more brightly. There were few sounds in the empty night. The wolf lay at his feet, its tail thumping rhythmically. It looked at him with knowing eyes.

"They won't let me keep you. And besides, I don't think you want to be kept. But what is it you want? Why did you come here? And why to me? Is it because I *am* different? But what can that mean to you?"

"Perhaps it is that you are part wolf yourself," came Rifka's close-by whisper.

He looked up, startled. The girl was standing just across the dying fire. She wore a loose sleeping robe draped across her shoulders. It fell straight from her breasts, leaving her lower body veiled in shadow. Makstarn felt his heart begin pounding. His mind slipped momentarily back to the way he had seen her earlier—with Jetarn. She had worn less then . . . but not so well.

"Why have you come?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

"I must talk with you."

"Sit," he nodded. The blanket covered the dewy grass.

She crossed around the fire and sat down on the blanket, but no closer to him than necessary.

"I have to know," she said. "Are you going to tell?"

"Tell?"

"The Elders. About—me and Jetarn."

"Shouldn't I?"

Her eyes flashed, but he could not tell if she was angry, or holding back tears. "What do they expect?" she asked. "Why should we obey their stupid rules when they mean nothing any more?"

"It is still the rule."

"I know! No one may marry or conceive a child within the tribe," she said in bitter parody of old Hekmight's voice. "We must always seek our mates within other tribes. Everyone, that is, but you! *You're* different!"

He said nothing, holding his face wooden and impassive. It was something he'd learned long ago: not to betray emotions that might be used against him. At his feet, the wolf still thumped its tail, dog-like.

"But what good are such rules if we know no other tribes? Tell me that!"

"I did not make the rules," he said.

"No, but you alone can benefit from them. You alone are not bound by them. Your blood is new blood, they say. So we girls should make a line before your tent?"

"You haven't yet."

"We never will! Who could sleep beside one so hairy and ugly? Who could bed with such an *animal*?"

"I used to be a toad," he said tonelessly.

She gave a short, bitter laugh. "A conceited toad! You still are!"

"You are very adroit," he said.

"What?"

"You are clever. You have chosen a clever method to seal my lips and keep me from talking."

She sighed, and seemed to grow smaller.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Let me start again."

"No," he said, beginning to enjoy himself. "You're not sorry. Why should we pretend you are? Why should we pretend you've not said the things you have?"

"You want me, don't you?" she flared. "You want my body! You'll tell on Jetarn, just to have me!"

He shook his head. It felt very heavy. "Who could want you?" he asked, tasting the lies as they formed in his mouth. "Who could bear your spiteful presence? Go away, Rifka. Go away and leave me alone. Go steal into Jetarn's tent and make the sweet puppy happy. You disgust me."

She leapt to her feet, then seemed caught by an internal struggle. "You—will you—will you tell?"

"That's all you care about?"

She whirled, and suddenly the sleeping robe was in her hands, and her body was free. He stared up at her, at her youthful, slender body, golden-skinned in the light of the embers. He stared up at her and felt an impossible ache flood his body. *Rifka!* he wanted to shout. *I want you! I love you! I need you!* He said nothing.

"Can I buy your silence?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I cannot be bought. Not by you."

She flung the robe back over her shoulders, and his loins ached for the sight of her once more. "I think I shall ask Jetarn to kill you," she said over her shoulder as she moved into the night.

Two hours later, Makstarn had gathered up his most precious possessions. He had his crossbow, and his knife, a knife he had found on one of his secret visits to the ruins of the city. He had made a pack of provisions that might last him a week if he ate sparingly, and he had a water skin. The pack he slung over his back, the cross-bow over it. The skin, full with cold spring water, he hung at his belt, balanced on the other side by his knife and the quiver of cross-bow bolts.

"Come, fellow," he called softy to the wolf. The animal rose quickly, as though it had been waiting just this command.

Overhead, the Red Moon hung in the east. Ahead, to the west, were the mountains that rimmed the desert.

What was it Rifka had said? That perhaps he was part wolf himself? Had his father been equally so? They had both been dark; he was even covered with black curly

hair like a wolf. And this wolf had come for him, out of the desert.

Out of the same desert from which had come his father.

It was time to leave this tribe, time to leave its hostile embrace. His mother—she might weep for him. But no one else would care, except perhaps for foolish old Hek-might, with his dreams of bringing new blood into the tribe. It was too late for that; the tribe neither wanted nor needed new blood.

It was time to find his own people.

With the wolf pacing eagerly at his side, he set out for the sawtooth ridge of mountains that loomed high in the west.

# Chapter 2

The Red Moon cast a warm glow over the lowlands. As he strode through the wet heavy grass he smelled its pungent scent. To the north, and not far off, were the hulking dark ruins of the ancient City Shanathor. They had captured his curiosity long ago, and he had spent many secret hours among them, sometimes, as tonight, in the dusky moonlight.

Makstarn filled his chest with the night air, breathing in his freedom. The vague sounds of night insects were in his ears, and the soft *swish-pad* of the wolf at his side offered companionship. The air tasted good, and the chirping of the insects was a sound that had lulled him to sleep on many a night.

Could he truly leave it all behind? Could he desert his childhood and his home so effortlessly?

It perplexed him. He had thought of running away before, but always aimlessly, without plan or direction. He had thought vaguely of striking eastward, finding another tribe, and of being welcomed into it. He had even entertained exciting fantasies of uniting the tribes to lead them against the hated raiders. But always his thoughts were of a future, when he was older . . . *when he was a man* . . .

He glanced up. The stars had moved with him. Overhead were the glittering constellations of the Great Shep-

herd, with his long robe and four-starred staff; the star-swarm of his flock that cut a great milky band across two thirds the sky; and his watchdog, tail pointing to the polestar in the north. Old Hekmight had spun many tales around the campfire about the Great Shepherd, when Makstarn had been younger. The old man had woven a spell with his words, transporting Makstarn into lands of enchantment and excitement. It had been difficult to return to reality, and easy to beg for more stories. He wished that he could believe in them now.

West of the city, a great road cut across the land directly for the mountains. It was said that this road cleft the very mountains themselves, and led directly into the fiery inferno of the desert. And it was said, too, that his father had come out of the desert on this same road.

"What about you, Boy? Did you take the road?" he asked the wolf. The wolf only looked up at him and wagged its tail.

Another hour or two should bring them to the road. Makstarn tried to calculate the time it would take to climb it into the mountains. How much longer could he go this night? He needed rest. But he felt the camp behind him as a palpable force at his back, thrusting him onward. He wanted to be too far away to be hunted or found, come dawn.

As he grew more tired, the wonder increased in him. Was this he, himself, doing this thing? What mad thoughts had possessed him to send him *west*, into the Great Desert? Could life with the tribe truly be so intolerable?

It could.

It is the nature of memory to forget the bad, and to recall the familiar, the pleasant. Happiness, Hekmight had once said, existed only in retrospection, in the golden glow of memory. But he could remember much more than that, and quite clearly. Where was the happiness in his memories? In the insults and curses so often visited upon him by the other children?

He thought of Rifka, and of her newly flowering body.

She was two years younger than he, but already she had, if not openly, achieved womanhood—while he remained a boy.

He remembered her as she had been younger. There had been a time when she had not hated him as some of the other children had. She had teased about him, but as might an adoring younger sister. She had stolen his crossbow once, he remembered—and a flush came to his face with the memory—it was the first he had made for himself. He had studied with Jarimight, and had learned to work the hard, yet springy wood until he could notch and fit together a bow of his own that was sturdy and unflawed. And Rifka had stolen it, had sneaked into his tent while he was sleeping and taken it from his side.

The next day he had been frantic, wondering who could have taken it, and what might have come of it. And then little Rifka, slender, straight little Rifka with the sad eyes, had led him to a firepit, and pointed to the charred tip of a bow.

He'd sat upon the ground and stared at that remaining piece, and he had wanted badly to cry, to rage and storm against those who tormented him, and to strike them with his fists. He'd sat upon the ground silently and he'd done nothing but stare woodenly at the ashes.

It must have frightened the girl. It had been a joke, and as a matter of fact, as she'd confessed later, one she'd heard the other boys discussing. Only they had not thought of her way to end the joke.

She had given him back the crossbow, whole. And she had told him she was sorry she'd made him unhappy. He'd believed her. He'd realized, from out of his own forced maturity, that she only wanted his attention. It was not in her to be truly malicious—then.

What had happened? What had changed her?

He pushed through a sparse stand of trees that sighed in the night wind, and found the edge of the wide road. He looked back along its length. Back to the east it unwound, a black ribbon as straight as an arrow, until it disappeared in the ruins of the city.

Westward: the mountains, looming closely.

Had he come far enough? He looked up again at the moons, the stars. There were perhaps three hours left before dawn. Somehow it felt safer, easier, to travel under the cloak of night. He turned to the west along the wide, flat, featureless black road.

His thoughts returned to Rifka. How had she changed? It was true, he was often annoyed with her. He had been quite angry at her "joke" with the bow. Perhaps he had taken her too much for granted, and had noticed her flowering into maidenhood too late . . .

The noose fell upon him from out of the night.

The leather loop whispered over his shoulders, and then tightened viciously, pinning his arms to his sides in a sudden wiry grip. He had only a moment to let out his breath in surprise; then he was yanked backward and off his feet.

There was a moment of unbalance as he lay upon his backpack, and then he tried to scramble up again, and with his left hand he made crabwise motions for his knife. But the leash that held him kept him off balance, tripping him over backwards, dragging him, tumbling him again and again against the hard abrasive surface of the road.

Finally he lay silent, panting through his open mouth, staring upwards.

Both moons were gone in the darkness that foretold dawn. Only the coldly glittering stars cast their faint light upon the land.

Something belched, a gross animal sound. Then a silhouette move silently from the shadows close by to the side and out onto the road. A whiff of breeze brought the scent of the unwashed beast to him, and Makstarn knew without seeing its high-arched neck that the animal was a lemac.

*Only raiders tamed and rode lemacs.*

The noose had not loosened. Now it tugged at him again, twisting him over and jerking him to his knees.

The tight leather thong cut like a sapling switch into his arms, and Makstarn clenched his teeth to keep the pain from escaping his throat.

Hauled to his feet, he faced his captor. The man sat high on his mount, hooded and covered in a dark robe. His face was hidden in shadow, only a long thin nose and a sandy beard visible. He held the end of the leather noose taut against the high cantle of his saddle.

He was a raider. Makstarn had never before seen a raider, but he had heard many tales from the older men about them.

"Like carnivores that prey on men," Jarimight had once said of them. "Their weapons are for use against men—not game. They carry great swords and it is their delight to ride against their foes on the foul lemacs, swinging and slashing at men on foot with their swords."

"Why do we not forge swords, then?" Makstarn had asked. "Why don't we take herds of lemacs for our own, in defense?"

Jarimight had shaken his head with a stubborn vigor. "We are honest men, Boy. We have no need for such things."

Further argument had been useless. "What good would it be for us to arm ourselves against the raiders if we took their own arms, Boy? Of what value would it be if we were to become unwashed riders of unclean beasts and no better than the raiders ourselves?"

Makstarn could only shake his own head uselessly in the frustration of being unable to answer, and unable to prove that he might be right.

"You!" The harsh voice of the raider cut through his attempts to gather his dazed wits to him again. "Who be you, boy, and where be your people?" His accent was alien—thick, as if he lingered over his words and then swallowed them.

Makstarn tried to hold himself upright. For the first time he was face to face with one of the hated ravagers of his people. *This man before him was one of those his father had fought!* The thought at once thrilled and

frightened him. His father had been a man, but he . . .

An arm lashed out, and something quick and cutting whipped across Makstarn's face. A band of fire seared across his brow and left cheek, and he stumbled as he tried, helplessly, to raise his arms in defense. The noose checked his movement with a sudden jerk.

"Speak, plains dung!" came the raider's command.

Makstarn felt tears come to his eyes, and could not be certain which angered him more—the tears or the ignominy of his capture. "A wanderer—I'm a wanderer," he choked out. His voice broke as he added, "I have no people here."

Again the lash across his face, and this time something wet and tasting of salt, but not perspiration, found its slow trickling way to the corner of his mouth.

"A lie!" the raider pronounced. "You come to spy upon our camp, one who sneaks in the night for frightened sheep."

Makstarn shook his head dumbly. The pain confused him. His emotions rallied uncertainly. He felt his heart pounding in his chest as though he had just run a long distance, and his legs threatened to stop supporting him. Somewhere a distant, detached part of his mind berated and scolded him and wondered how he had ever come to find himself in this deadly trap. But he cried out, "The road! I was only following the road!"

The raider sneered. "Toward the mountains, the desert? Do you take me for a fool? What would a mere boy like yourself be doing on such a trek?" He laughed. "The camp you wanted, the camp you'll see. But you'll not see your people again!"

A command, and the lemac abruptly wheeled, tumbling Makstarn and dragging him as he scrambled for his feet again after it.

*The wolf,* he wondered. *Where is the wolf?"*

The campsite of the raiders was not far off the road, sheltered amid a clump of upended rocks that had once served as a basin, catching and holding the silt of spring

rains and now providing a flat sandy floor perhaps ten paces across.

In the center the coals of a fire still smoldered, casting little more than a ruddy glow. When the raider dismounted, leaving his lemac among five others, and led Makstarn into the camp, only one man was awake. The others were folded in their robes and sprawled on the sand against the wall of rocks.

At their sounds, the sitting raider came smoothly to his feet, facing Makstarn and his captor with a drawn blade that glowed in the dim light.

He returned his sword to its scabbard and tossed kindling upon the coals. A fire quickly sprang up.

"Well, Sameal, what have you brung me?" the man asked. His voice was almost jovial, and his eyes seemed to twinkle. Like Sameal his lower face was hidden in a thick and unruly beard.

Sameal pushed Makstarn roughly forward. "They sent us a sneak," he said.

"Eh? Who was that?"

"The herders—you know who I mean, Dannel. The cowards of the plains, so brave they sent only a boy!"

Dannel chuckled. He put a large rough hand on Makstarn's chin and lifted it, staring down into the boy's eyes. Then he took Makstarn's right shoulder and turned him around. He waited until the boy was facing him again, and then chuckled once more.

"Sameal, you're as blind as the day they whelped you. Look at the boy."

Sameal had thrown back his hood, and now joined Dannel's side. To Makstarn the sight of the man's face was a relief. Hooded it had seemed mysterious and evil. Revealed now in the snapping firelight, it was only tired and weak. Sameal's eyes sat too close to the sides of his prominent beak, and his forehead sloped only a little before meeting his low sandy brow. His hair was disordered and clung in strands that suggested it had gone long unwashed. This was no more than a man, after all. He even looked a little like old Saimight, who was known as The

Feeble. But Sameal's eyes narrowed as he asked in a half-snarl, "and what is it I'm to see?"

Still chuckling, Dannel cuffed the other man, a casual swing of his hand that all but knocked Sameal from his feet. "Son of a cur, think of something more than what lies under the loin-gather for oncel Observe: a packsack, for travelling. A waterskin, for travelling. And observe: dark features. Black hair, brown skin. Short, but thickly put together. Dark hair on arms and legs. A plainsboy? Hah!"

Sameal rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, but if he resented Dannel's treatment of him he did not otherwise show it. "What do you make of him, then?" he asked.

"Where'd you find him?"

"Out on the road, heading west."

"Did you *ask* him?"

"He—he would not speak."

"That's a lie!" Makstarn said, speaking for the first time.

Both men shot him startled looks. It was almost as though a bundle of kindling wood had spoken out about the quality of the fire.

But then Dannel's gaze narrowed, and his open hand swept out.

Makstarn found himself sitting upon the ground, his head ringing from the blow, his left ear full of fractured pain. He tugged with his arms, but Sameal had secured the noose with a knot, and he could not reach up to touch his throbbing ear.

"Boys do not call the Rassanala's men liars," Dannel admonished, gently. "However—" he reached for the free end of the noose dangling in the sand and hauled Makstarn once more to his feet, "However, you may tell me your name and your purpose in these lands."

Makstarn felt the tears flowing fully down his cheeks and was ashamed. He bit against his lip and then said, "I told the other one—I am a wanderer. I was following the road west. I—I have no people."

Sameal sneered. "Do you believe him?"

"I do not disbelieve him," Dannel replied. "He is obviously a wanderer. And I have never seen people of his like in these lands before. But, so young . . .

"Boy, your name!"

*My name!* Makstarn thought. *It will betray me!*

"I—I am only called Boy," he said. It was only a half-lie. "I have not yet won my man-name." *Why had he said that?* Why had he thought of such a thing just then?

"I've not heard of such practices," Dannel said slowly. "But then . . . I've not laid eyes upon such as this one either. Ah, why bother? Get back to your rounds, Sameal. This is a puzzle for the Captain when he wakes."

Makstarn caught a glimpse of Sameal throwing his hood back over his head, and then Dannel's rough hands had caught him. Dannel twisted him around, and expertly trussed his hands behind him with the free end of the noose. Makstarn felt his hands going numb within seconds. A kick from behind dropped him to his knees, and then something struck his skull and he fell on his face in the sand.

Dannel laughed, a soft, deceivingly warm sound. Makstarn tried to twist himself about, and when he had, saw the other sitting on his heels staring directly at him.

In the firelight, Dannel's eyes looked kindly. His face was broad, ruddy in the glow of the embers, and lined by the weather. His hair was a mass of thick curls that fell freely to his shoulders, a tangle that joined his full beard. Thick lips could be barely glimpsed curling in a smile.

There was something reassuring in the man. Makstarn tried to summon up his courage. "Please—what is to become of me?"

Dannel leaned closer, his face so close that Makstarn could feel the man's fetid breath on his own. "Why, now, that be up to the Captain."

"Oh."

"He'll kill you, I expect." Dannel leaned back again, rocking slowly on his heels, his voice low and confiden-

tial. "Maybe a little sport first, for the rest of us, and then —well, the Captain wouldn't keep you on for that sort of thing; it's not his way."

*He'll kill you, I expect.* The soft words cut like knives into Makstarn's shrinking gut, and a roaring grew in his ears that all but obliterated the rest of what the big man had said. *He'll kill you, I expect.* The words seemed to repeat themselves like the roar of the river rapids, over and over, running together, colliding with each other, growing into a vast, meaningless janle of fear: *Kill expect he'll I you kill I expect he'll you kill . . . kill . . . kill . . .*

Death is never an unreal thing for those who live with it. And yet it becomes impersonal, distant, elemental—its familiarity breeds callousness. In Makstarn's childhood other children had died—some of the disease, one drowned in the river, and one, a girl whom Makstarn had always hated, impaled upon the misfired shaft of a crossbow, her blood spurting from her throat, soon to attract flies—but no one among those children who lived had grieved. These were not the first the Shepherd had gathered into His flock, nor would they be the last.

Makstarn remembered the girl—Syntha had been her name, and it was still an ugly name—who had died with the shaft in her throat. One of the oldest of the children, tall for a girl, and active among the boys in the competitive games, she had so often made sport of him, her teasing strident and cruel—the more so because she was a girl and could easily take refuge in the fact. His dominant memory of her as she had been in life was that of her prancing about, her face screwed up into a taunting grimace, her golden braids flying.

One of the men—he no longer remembered who—had been instructing in target practice. A crossbow had been badly cocked, and the trigger had slipped free the thong. No one seen it. Syntha had made no sound. One moment she had been combing wool before her tent. The next,

she was collapsed over her work, the wool thick with warm, sticky blood.

A shout had gone up, and Makstarn had been one of those who had gathered to stare at the dying child. Someone had pulled her back from the wool, and now she lay loosely sprawled on her back, blood still pulsing feebly from her throat.

He had stared at her and had not been able to feel sorry for her. He was nine years old, and his single thought was: *Now she'll leave me alone.*

And then all too soon he was back at crossbow instruction, Jetarn covertly poking him in the back with a shaft, and it was as if Syntha had never been.

Only now Makstarn began to wonder if Syntha had seen the shaft. Had she known? Had she warning? How might she have felt, to know that death was a single instant away? Or had she only that sudden, shocking knowledge of a *thing* in her throat—of pain and choking and surprise?

Had she known she was dying? *Did she know she was dead?*

He felt something warm flood his upper thighs, and it was several moments before he realized what it was. Then he felt bitterly ashamed.

The raider was still rocking on his heels as dawn chased the stars from the graying sky.

## Chapter 3

He had fallen into tormented dreams and did not wake until a kick caught him in his kidney.

The sun was white in the early morning sky, and already the low wall of rocks was catching and reflecting its heat.

"You. Up!"

Makstarn shook his head in bewilderment. His tongue was thick and fumbling in his mouth, and his body dead. There was no sensation in his arms and little in his legs. A dull ache was only beginning to spread over the small of his back from the kick.

He gazed up without comprehension at the men standing around him. They were tall blotches against the white sky. One of them moved, and water struck his face. He wanted to cry out his thanks for that blessed kindness, but only choked. Somehow he managed to catch a few drops of the vital liquid in his mouth.

His temples began to throb painfully, and then one of the men reached down and yanked him roughly to a sitting position. It was a trigger. Immediately he vomited.

No one helped him. No one moved. The men stared down at him like implacable statues, tall against the morning sun, their long shadows falling over him like cage bars.

"He's half dead," said a voice. "Cut him loose."

"Ahhh, brain 'im," said another voice. "He's no use to us like this."

"Speak for yourself," said a voice that Makstarn recognized as Sameal's. "I'll take it where I can find it."

"You had your chance," the first voice said. Makstarn stared blankly at the ground.

There was just one, very simple thing that had to be understood: *these were raiders.* These were men to whom his life was meaningless, hence worthless. Sooner or later they would kill him. They might make it a painful death or a quick one. But they would kill him.

It was not too hard to accept. Makstarn had never harbored many illusions about himself—his playmates had seen to that. And once one had experienced the initial fear of impending death it was not so very hard to face the actuality of death.

What could be worse than this, after all? Did death come all at once, or in slow degrees? Was he not already a little dead? He wanted it all to be over with; he wanted an end to it. Death did not seem unattractive.

The men were arguing. Their voices rose and fell. At some point Makstarn fell again upon his back. He felt a sharp, almost delicious pain in the back of his skull. There was a moment of bright illumination in which he thought he could understand it all—then nothing.

The white disk of the summer sun rose high in the sky, and the land grew still. Birds that had chirped and called to each other and flitted from rock to bush were silent now, drowsing amid the sheltered branches in the shade. Small rodents that had stolen about the campsite searching out those abandoned crumbs of food that man inevitably leaves behind him had once again disappeared. Only their tiny tracks in the sand wove here and there to record their nervous passage.

The sun beat down heavily upon the land, and small scaly creatures nestled in the cracks of the rocks while

above there was only one lonely sign of movement—the wheeling of a blue-black scavenger bird, dipping and careening under the sky.

There was no wind, and the sky was clean of clouds. The trees seemed to droop, the land itself to pant in the heat.

The scavenger bird dipped lower, its instincts confused, worried. Once it swooped down in a dive, only to break its plunge and bank up again with furious pinions of its wings, the backlash of wind stirring the sand and flinging it against the thing that had moved.

The thing that had moved lay silent again, but still alive. There was a smell to it, the smell of death not yet come. But it was enough to warn off the rodents, whose hither and yon trails skirted the thing that had moved, even as it had attracted the anxious blue-black bird that still dipped and wheeled impatiently above.

The sun followed its implacable course westward, and once again the shadows grew, and the land seemed to come alive again. A breeze stirred gently, fanning over the thing that still moved, catching at the sand adhered to its skin and brushing it free. And once again it moved, making a sound of torment.

A small red beetle appeared in the sand near the thing that had moved, and began an inching course toward its shadow. The beetle followed the dips and hollows in the sand, cresting each as a raft might an ocean's waves. It detoured a small pebble, and entered the shade. Soon it was climbing the thing.

The beetle climbed over a mossy pelt of hair, too light in weight to disturb it. Then it followed a long bare patch of blotchy skin until at last it was once more on the sand. Then a bird dropped down from a nearby bush and ate it.

Finally the sun sank behind the western mountains, and twilight fell across the land. The graceful muneys came at last from their burrows to leap and play upon the turf and sand, and larger animals moved into strategic positions.

Down out of the rocks leapt a large shape. Simultaneously, there was a thud and a high-pitched squeal. There were other peeps and squeaks and in a moment's scampering the sand was empty of muneys . . . of live muneys . . .

The wolf settled down with the muney it had caught. There was a brittle sound as it broke the small animal's back. The wolf snarled to itself and worried at the furry corpse. Then, suddenly, the wolf lifted its head. The breeze had shifted. It sniffed.

Carrying the muney in its mouth, the wolf padded softly across the sand to the unmoving body of the creature it had once known. It dropped the muney and began sniffing and nosing about the naked figure on the sand. It circled the body completely, twice, and then settled back on its haunches to regard it, as though puzzled. A low whine broke from its throat.

For Makstarn, death was real. He knew without doubt that he had died. What he had not expected was a return to life.

He retained no conscious memories of his ordeal; only a certain buried knowledge that he would carry with him for the rest of his life. He had died, but had not remained dead. That he would always know.

His memories began with dreams, the dreams of lying in his mother's arms, a small child again. She was bathing him, gently, as she had done when he had been a baby. It was very nice.

But gradually the bathing grew harsher and he began to become dimly aware that his mother's arms were hard and cold, and that she was making strange animal noises.

When he opened his eyes he saw the wolf, looming in the scarlet light of the red moon, sitting before him. The wolf's tongue was hanging out, and its eyes gazed directly into his.

For a moment Makstarn did not comprehend. He saw a strangely benign creature with an expression of con-

cern upon its elongated face, and he remembered his mother and wondered that this was not she.

The wolf made a low sound in its throat—not a whine, nor yet a growl, but an almost human sound. It nudged something at him with its nose.

Makstarn tried to focus his eyes at the bloody object. He caught the scent and knew that it was a dead animal, and that it had not been dead long. A long involuntary shudder passed over his body and that was when he knew that he had himself been dead.

The wolf stayed with him for the rest of the night. It ate its muney when at last it seemed to understand that Makstarn would not, and later, when both moons had set and the air had grown cool, it stretched out its length against the boy's body. In his fevered sleep, Makstarn slipped one arm around the animal and pressed himself closer to it.

For Makstarn the night was a period without duration, timeless, filled with hallucinations and nightmares, and yet, in later memory, too brief to really recall. At times sweat rolled from his body; at other times he shook with chills. Later he would look back upon that night, and the day that preceded it, and wonder if it had been one night or many. And he would marvel at his own resilience.

He woke again when the rising sun touched his eyes.

He was lying against the sleeping wolf, his face half buried in its fur. The fur had a dusty odor, but it was not unpleasant, and perhaps even reassuring.

Fragmented thoughts came to him as he lay unmoving by the wolf.

He was alive.

The wolf, stretched out, was bigger than he.

He was naked.

He was alive.

He tried to sit up. Immediately he became dizzy, and vertigo communicated directly to his stomach. Involuntarily, he heaved, his tortured stomach empty.

He lay back again and tried to gather his memories.

He recalled his capture. It was a bitter, but curiously disassociated memory. He remembered being tied up by one of the raiders. His name . . . Dannel . . . ? He remembered being told he would be killed. He did not remember anything else.

And yet—this sandy bed and the surrounding rocks. He turned his head carefully. And yes: the charred remnants of the fire, there in the sand, not even covered by a few quick kicks of a boot. Yes, this was the same place they had made their camp. But, the wolf was with him now; *where were the raiders?*

He felt there was something he ought to know that he could not remember. But trying to remember only brought pain to his head.

He twisted over onto his back and raised an arm.

Deep grooves circled his wrist and cut across his forearm. He bent his wrist. It seemed swollen about the grooves, and moved stiffly. The grooves themselves were blue-black, their edges greenish.

He tried to catalogue his body's aches and pains. It was difficult; his body felt sore and misused—the way it had when he had made the mistake of letting too many of the others gang up on him in fights when he'd been younger. For a day or two afterwards he would feel bruised all over. This was worse. His other arm and wrist were equally badly scored.

His head ached. When he put his right hand behind his head, his touch produced a sharp immediate pain, and he could feel a swelling and the crust of matted, dried blood in his hair.

The sun was warming the air. At first the heat felt good, and then it made him short of breath and nauseous. He tried sitting up again.

His arms moved clumsily, but he managed to prop himself into a sitting position, his body weakly protesting. A strong shock hit him when he looked down his body. Cuts and bruises discolored his legs and torso, and the skin was angrily blistered in long patches. He

seemed to have shed a quarter of his weight. The body that he stared down at was emaciated and bony and almost totally unfamiliar.

His immediate need was shade; shade and rest. And water, he suddenly realized. He was terribly thirsty.

Carefully, he turned onto his hands and knees. The soft sand thrust up between his fingers but ground abrasively against his knees. He groaned, softly.

Immediately the wolf's ears jumped up into alertness and it rolled over onto its feet in one fluid motion.

"Hullo, Wolf," Makstarn said, tasting the words as he formed them. His voice was low and seemed to catch in his dry throat, but it resounded loudly against the rocks.

The wolf settled back onto its haunches and stared at him. He wondered what strange thoughts lay behind those gentle eyes.

But it had come back. It had returned to him. It did not matter why. Not yet. Not now.

With the wolf pacing slowly at his side, Makstarn crawled into a patch of morning shade where a low tree angled out over the rocks. He leaned back against the cool surface of the rock and wondered what he could do now. His breath came in short pants, and he felt very weak. The wolf yawned and curled up next to him again.

Then Makstarn fell once more into sleep.

He rested, alternately awake and dozing, for the rest of the day. It was hot, but not unbearable in the shade. His mouth was dry and his tongue fuzzy, but he found a smooth pebble and sucked on it, and that brought some relief. Mostly he dreamed, strange waking dreams in which it rained, or water bubbled up out of a nearby stream, or he found himself well and clothed again and got up and walked away—always, each time, many times, to reawaken and find himself still propped against the rock wall in the sand.

That evening he was awakened by the wolf. It was making a peculiar noise.

It had another dead muney in its mouth.

The big shaggy animal looked up at him with eyes that brimmed with intelligence. The limp muney dangled pathetically from it jaws. The wolf made its sound again, a low throaty sound that seemed almost like a choked cry—startlingly human, and with a rising inflection.

He looked at the wolf and at its dead offering, and he felt like laughing; like letting go with the hysterical laughter of one who is caught in a fever. He needed water; he could stomach no food and if he could it would not be a raw animal, uncooked and still covered with warm fur.

The wolf carefully laid its prey upon his lap. The muney was a bedraggled thing, its fur matted from the wolf's saliva, and it was still quite warm against his skin. Quite suddenly, it gave a convulsive twitch, and the wolf's paw shot out, holding it, pressing it against Makstarn's belly. Makstarn shook with nausea, and passed out.

When he awoke, the Red Moon was in the east, full in its malevolent scarlet stain. The muney still lay upon his stomach, and without thinking he reached out and touched it. It had grown cooler, but not yet stiff. He looked up. A short distance away, the wolf was gnawing at a small heap of bones. It had found more than one muney.

Makstarn felt lightheaded and desperately dry. He knew that he had lost a great deal of water the day before, and not a great deal less this day as well. He needed water.

And since he had no water, a substitute would have to do.

Carefully, deliberately, and with great difficulty, he tore open the dead muney with his teeth, and sucked at it. Its fur was musky, almost so much so that his stomach revolted at the task. But if he could not eat, he could gnaw at the small animal, tearing free bits of raw flesh, chewing the juices from them and swallowing thirstily

and painfully. Finally, exhausted by the chore, he threw what was left to the wolf.

After that he slept again, but later in the night he came awake. This time his head was clear, and he felt a change in himself. Shakily, he climbed to his feet and stood, bracing himself against the rock wall. The wolf was gone. Carefully, supporting himself with one hand against the upright rock slabs, he made his way to a spot a little way from where he had lain. There he relieved himself. It was strangely painful, but he did not question it among all the other pain his body had endured.

When he returned to the place he had hollowed for himself in the sand, he let himself down once more. Sleep came easily now. And when he felt the furry body of the wolf against him later, he did not wake, but only moved closer to it.

# Chapter 4

When the new day came, he came awake with a feeling of expectation. At first he did not understand it, but as he sat upright he sniffed the air and filled his lungs with it. The day smelled good.

The sun hung below a long purple cloudbank that stretched like a sandbar across the sky above the horizon. The air tasted clean, freshly bathed and scented with the perfume of flowers. The leaves of the twisted tree that overhung the rocks whispered to the birds that sat preening among them.

The wolf climbed sleepily to its feet and arched and stretched, paws digging in the sand. It yawned, its yellowed fangs pickets about its lolling pink tongue.

It was going to be a good day. He could feel it. He could feel within himself the changes.

The wolf too seemed aware of it. It eyed him expectantly, and then began a curious game, the point of which Makstarn could not at first understand.

The wolf began a peculiar pacing, trotting off across the sand to the opposite wall of rocks, turning to look back at him over its shoulder, then returning once more to where he sat.

Over and over, the shaggy beast would pace across to a gap in the rocks, only to stop, look back at him, tongue lolling, eyes imploring, and then return once again to

hunker down at Makstarn's feet and look sadly up at him.

Puzzled, Makstarn got to his feet.

Immediately, the wolf lept up and ran eagerly back across the sand.

Makstarn was not entirely unintelligent. He followed.

In a sheltered crevice among the rocks was a pool of water. As Makstarn pulled himself up to it, the wolf lowered its head and began lapping the water noisily. Makstarn felt a vast sense of wonder for the beast which had so completely linked its life to him, and to which he now owed his.

When the wolf had finished, he waited out of a residual fastidiousness for the pool to grow still again. And then he bent his own head over the water.

The sun was at his back. Overhead the sky had already paled to the lightest shade of blue. When at first he stared into the still water, he saw only his dark silhouette there. But then he saw a face. He saw a face that stared back at him with hooded eyes that seemed only dark pockets in a living skull. He saw tight features that stretched over bone, features divided diagonally by a thick black line.

He stared, transfixed, as questing fingers rose to touch . . . to trace the hardened scab that filled the channel carved across the brow, across the bridge of a nose, down over a thrusting cheekbone where it split wider, and finally to a bony jawline.

Slowly, the mouth in the water opened and closed. The face that stared back at him drew its brows together in a beginning frown, and then paled in pain.

He stared into the water for a long time. And then he bent to drink.

Later, he began exploring the area.

It was deserted, of course. The raiders and their filthy lemacs were long gone. He had known this without needing to confirm it. Had they remained anywhere

nearby, he would not have been left unmolested. They had left, and they had left him for dead.

Beyond the enclosure of rocks he found the area where the lemacs had been picketted. The grass had been chewed to its roots, and here and there clods had been uprooted. Piles of dung lay about, odor almost gone, but insects still self-importantly buzzing about them. He found his loin-gather and tunic on the ground nearby. It was apparent that they had been used for some necessary but disagreeable task. They were quite unwearable.

He carried them back to the sand, where he tossed them for the moment.

He found his pack caught between two rocks where it had been thrown. Near it he found his belt. Still on the belt were both waterskin—now empty—and the sheathed knife. For these things he was grateful. The raiders, in their apparent contempt for his belongings, had apparently left them unrifled. Only his crossbow and shafts were still missing.

After he had refreshed himself sparingly with food from the pack, he set himself to the task of cleaning his clothes. First he began scrubbing them with sand.

He worked carefully, pausing at intervals to rest himself. His body was still achingly weak. But it responded to the work, and he felt increasingly cheerful as he became absorbed in the immediate task.

He found the crossbow as he worked at cleaning the two garments with the sand. He found a full four inches of the bowstock unburned in the charred cinders of the fire. It had become buried in the sand.

He picked it up and fondled it for a moment. His eyes burned. It seemed like the final end of a cruel and pointless joke.

When the smell was gone from his clothes, he took them to the pool and washed them clean of sand. Then he hung them to dry on branches of a shrub. The sun

made steam rise from them, and he returned almost hastily to his shaded nook against the rocks.

He was hot and sweating. His skin was one long series of painful strips protesting the direct bite of the sun. Wearily, he laid himself down to a deep nap.

The wolf awoke him with its return. The sun was over the mountains, and the air felt cooler again. Somewhere overhead a bird scolded angrily.

Squirming in the wolf's teeth was a short, thick-bodied lizard. Its tail whipped back and forth like a snake. When the wolf dropped it at Makstarn's side, it flipped itself over onto its feet and ran directly at the rock wall.

The wolf cuffed it with one paw, and then looked up at Makstarn. Its look spoke quite plainly: *Well, why don't you do something about it?*

Makstarn had never eaten a lizard, but he knew that those who had considered the creatures delicacies. Reaching for his belt, he pulled free his short, gleaming knife of ancient metal. The wolf herded the confused lizard back at him.

The task of killing the thing was both unpleasant and difficult. Its blue scaly hide was thick and tough, and seemed almost to blunt the knife's edge. And the devilish creature would not hold still! Finally, Makstarn placed his bare foot upon the lizard's back and pinned it, while he hacked its head free. And even then the tail would not stop its thrashing.

He made a fire. Once it was burning, he picked up the wooden stockpiece from his crossbow, turned over twice in his hands for the final look and feel of it, and then consigned it to the flames. Done. He felt it quite as clearly as if a tent flap had dropped between himself and his past.

A green branch, its bark peeled, made a spit for the skinned and cleaned lizard. Its meat, lightly salted and seasoned with wild herbs, was delicate and flavorful.

His clothes were dry. With a bone needle and woolen

thread, he sewed up the long tear in his tunic that had apparently occurred when it was ripped from him. It was a clumsy job, by his mother's standards, but otherwise acceptable.

He felt better wearing clothes, although the tunic seemed to hang loosely upon him, and where it rubbed across his shoulders and his back it made them itch painfully. Still, as he pulled his belt tightly around his waist, at last he felt once more fully human.

As he had worked and eaten, his thoughts had occupied themselves with two things: his immediate tasks, and the greater task of determining his life's direction.

Decisions did not come easily to Makstarn. It seemed as though every major decision required hours—perhaps days—of agonizing. He was cursed, he thought, with too understanding a mind. He could never see one course without seeing also its opposite. He could never listen to one argument without hearing the other side. And it had always seemed to him inexplicable that others could see a right path in only a single direction; that others could never see the wisdom in disagreement, never understand opposing viewpoints.

In retrospect, his own decisions had seemed inevitable. But he knew too that sometimes he had wrestled with them indecisively for far too long before accepting them. His decision to leave the tribe: it had crystalized in a single omen—the advent of the wolf—and he had acted upon it forthwith. But how long had he mulled the idea before that moment? How many weeks—months—years—had he told himself that some day he would go out into the world beyond? It had been like the funnelling of many tiny streams and brooks into larger streams, and those into a single great river: many thoughts and feelings, many reactions and memories, often diverse, had fed each other until at last there had been a single purpose.

But what now? Had his purpose still any meaning?

He had left his tribe in the dead of night to set out

upon a vague and romantic adventure. And he had found instead something quite concrete and deadly unromantic.

Already the scar tissues were forming in his memories even as they were on his face and arms. Already the pain of reality had receded from his memories of the raiders, to be replaced by abstractions, by words. *"They beat me." "They bound me." "They killed me."* Words. Words that spoke of suffering and inspired outrage, even as he thought them. But not suffering itself; no longer that.

And this experience—this single, overwhelming, transforming experience—had drawn a curtain between Makstarn and his tribal past. In the world in which he now lived, values had shifted; old feelings and fears seemed distant, unreal.

He could, he realized, return to his tribe now, if he chose to. And if indeed the tribe itself remained intact, undiscovered by the raiders. The reasons he had fled were no longer meaningful. He was no longer the boy who had endured childish taunts; nothing the tribes' children might try could touch him now.

He tried to conjure up before him the memory of Rifka, as she had revealed herself to him before the fire. He spoke her name aloud, but he could not see her face.

Makstarn spent that night and all the daylight hours of the next day in the sheltered campsite, resting, recuperating. Each time he ate, it was with more appetite; each time he walked it was upon more steady legs.

And when night fell once again, he filled his waterskin, shouldered his pack, and spoke to the wolf. That strange animal seemed to understand, and its body quivered with nervous eagerness, almost as if straining at a leash.

They kept well to the north of the road. With the bulky outline of the western mountains directly ahead of them, they crossed moonlit meadows and ducked under the dappled leaves of low inviting branches. They climbed hills and jumped small gullies. The air was night-fresh, full of the sounds of myriad living creatures,

wafting the scents of darkness upon light breezes. They did not go far, that first night, but for Makstarn even a short journey was a significant one. He had made his decision: they would continue west.

It took four days' journey to bring them into the mountains, where, hopeful that the raiders were long distant, Makstarn returned to the road. The way overland was difficult now, for these were no longer gentle foothills, but steep-sided mountains themselves: great shelvings of rock long ago upthrust by unguessable geological disasters; decayed now by eons of erosion by wind, water and rooted plants, but still brutal in their sudden elevations.

The road was the single way that led so deceptively easily up the steep slopes and past craggy cliffs. In places it cut through low escarpments as though carved with a giant knife in tallow. Elsewhere, it wound back and forth up canyons and over low passes. Everywhere it was the same; a wide band of obsidian black pavement that resisted almost all the ravages of time save one—the encroachment of grass and shrubbery as soil drifted or washed across its surface.

For Makstarn it was like stepping from night into day. His panting slogging up the rough mountain slopes became an evenly paced stride along the smooth grade.

It had not been an unsatisfying four days, however. It had been almost enough to follow the wolf across the open countryside, marvelling in all its little hidden beauties and dramas, without concern for destinations or the first goal the mountains represented.

Life in the river lowlands had been rich in its fashion, but tame by comparison. Wildlife there had grown accustomed to man and the proper ways to avoid him. One might sight a muney at dusk and bring it down with a crossbow shaft, and, to be sure, there were always the birds flitting about in the trees, and sometimes on the longpoles of the bigger tents—often leaving messes, sometimes stealing food scraps—but life about the tribe was *human* life, in all its mundane and sometime ugly

manifestations. Here, a silently moving figure in the scarlet moonlight, Makstarn was an intruder in an alien world—a world that had long forgotten humanity, if ever it had known it.

He had seen muneys at play. He had all but stumbled into a huge underground nest of insects. He had witnessed two battles between larger animals; battles which were inevitably decided in favor of the wolf, no matter who the original victor might have been. The first of these had brought the wolf an animal booty Makstarn had never seen before. The creature, as best he could tell before the wolf began rending it, was shaped not un-like a muney, with the same long tail and long, strong rear legs and short, almost pathetic forearms. But it was three times the size of a muney, and instead of a grey or brown coat, it was striped, black and white. And, when Makstarn could examine its teeth, later, he found them sharply pointed: carnivorous and quite unlike the gnawing chisels of the muney. He wondered if indeed there was any relationship between the two species.

He had been asleep when the second battle had started. He and the wolf had found a nestlike hollow beneath the low branches of an old tree, and had settled into it just as the early morning's heat began to strike the meadow beyond. He had awakened twice during the day to sip at his water and fall asleep again, and the second time he had noticed the wolf's absence. It did not surprise him. He knew the wolf enjoyed its solitary exploratory forays, and that often they would result in the wolf leading him that evening to a nearby stream or pool of water.

What brought him awake that evening was a sudden stiffening of the wolf—once more curled beside him. As he opened his eyes and stared at it, the wolf drew itself into a coiled crouch from which it could spring at any moment. Its ears were up and forward, the ruff at its neck slightly raised. It made no sound, but peered intently out at the meadow.

When Makstarn turned in the direction of the wolf's

stare, he was first aware of the mountain looming so close and high over the flat grassy meadow. The sky above was still a deepening blue, but the meadow itself was in purpling shadow, while the mountainside seemed to catch a ruddy glow from the already risen Red Moon. Out in the tall grass there was violent movement, as if something was thrashing about. He strained his ears, but heard nothing. The air was very still. That in itself was significant.

Suddenly a high-pitched scream echoed across the green, and with that the wolf unleashed itself to bound out of their hiding place.

Makstarn jumped to his feet and saw as he did so something with blurred stripes race off through the grass. Then he heard a sharp yelp from the wolf.

Drawing his knife, he ran out into the open. There he saw the wolf anxiously circling its stolen quarry.

At first he could not make out what the fallen creature was, even when he had come quite close to it. The wolf growled, angrily, and stopped every little bit to paw at its muzzle before continuing its wary pacing about the thing in the grass.

Then he understood.

What at first had looked like nothing more than a furry ball was a strange creature covered with long, needle-sharp spines. It lay unmoving, and when Makstarn stooped close over it, he saw that the spines protected only its back and sides. Its throat was a bloody gash. It was quite dead.

But yet the wolf would come no closer.

The light was going, but Makstarn dropped to his knees and pulled the wolf to him. The beast made a low whining growl in its throat, but let itself be held by its collar. Once again it raised a forepaw to push at its snout.

Makstarn saw it then: a short broken spine anchored in the outer flesh of the wolf's mouth. He grimaced. It must be quite painful.

Soothingly, he talked to the big animal, pulling its fore-

paws and front legs into his lap, bending over the overgrown dog to grip its muzzle firmly in his left hand. With his right, he pulled at the spine.

The wolf yelped, and jerked free of him, backing off to stare guardedly at him and growl softly.

Makstarn shook his head and sighed to himself. Again he spoke to the animal, his voice low and confident.

The wolf lowered itself until the front half of its body was pressed almost flat against the ground, while its rear still half-squatted, rump high, tail tucked between its hind legs. Whining to itself, it squirmed on its belly toward him. It was pathetic, and yet it made Makstarn smile. He kept talking to the big beast, his words low-pitched and full of reassurance and entreaty, while the wolf returned its head and forepaws to his lap.

Once more he held its muzzle, but this time he was more cautious with the broken spine. He worked it gently, feeling it catch and tear against its own wound. He knew he was hurting the wolf, and that even yet the wolf trusted him. Carefully, by slow degrees, he withdrew the spine. Half its length was covered with fresh blood; at its end was a wicked barb. The barb still held a bit of red flesh.

# Chapter 5

Makstarn had split open the spiny creature's belly with his knife, and he had skinned it, exposing a heavy layer of subsurface fat. But the wolf had wanted nothing of it, either because of a lingering distrust or because the wound to its mouth troubled it too greatly. Makstarn prayed to the Great Shepherd, in whom he no longer believed at all, that the spine had not been poisoned, and that the wound would soon heal, and then he had followed the wolf away from the skinned corpse, leaving it for its original antagonist or whatever else might choose to claim it.

That had been the last night before they had come back to the road once more; their last night hiking up steep slopes and across ever more narrow valleys. The way was difficult, and neither boy nor wolf had much heart for it. Makstarn had led the way south again, the wolf content to follow closely, and they had met the road, curving to meet them, not long before sunrise.

The road led through a series of passes and gaps, always following or creating its own cuts through the sharp folds of the high mountain ridges. It was possible to climb several thousand feet without once securing the kind of panoramic view back toward the east that would show so clearly the heights that had been climbed. Al-

ways, no matter how high the road itself had come, nearby peaks and ridges still obscured any but the most immediate view. And always, no matter how exhausted Makstarn came to feel after a day's trudging along the smooth-surfaced road, there seemed to loom higher mountains ahead. He was in the midst of the mountains now, and wondering if indeed they would ever come to an end at all.

The second day in the mountains the air had been quite hot and still, even at midnight. The Red Moon was high overhead when Makstarn felt the sudden cooling touch of a breeze against his arms. The wolf paused to raise its head and sniff the air, and when Makstarn looked back, the eastern sky was dark, the stars and second moon blotted out.

A storm? Yes, lightning flickered somewhere in the distance, momentarily lighting the underside of a massive cloudbank.

It might bring his night's journey to a halt, but he would welcome rain—rain to wash away the dust and sweat from his body, and to replenish the scant streams and pools along the way.

The wind picked up, definitely cooler now, buffeting against his back and whipping up the wolf's fur. Then the silent clouds slipped over the moon, and it was darker than even before dawn. The smell of rain was in the air.

Suddenly the sky split open with a blinding flash of light. Makstarn had a sharp vision of the black road, looming shoulders of the mountains on each side, and the wolf—the wolf's fur seemed to stand out from its body in every direction. Then the darkness was complete, his eyes blind. A great thunderclap struck then, rolling and rebounding from cliff-side, and Makstarn fell to his knees.

In the next few moments it seemed as though the gods had chosen this very gap in the mountains as their arena of war. Stark white flashes alternated with utter blackness while thunder echoed and re-echoed into one long

deafening peal that seemed to beat down on Makstarn like a drumming of fists.

Through the flashes he caught sight of a low tree, growing against the sheer grey rock of the cut through which the road ran. The tree seemed to spread its branches invitingly, and at its base there appeared a shallow pocket in the face of the low cliff. Grabbing the wolf's collar, he tugged it toward the tree, stumbling in the darkness. The wolf seemed rooted to its spot at first, but then reluctantly followed.

The wind died. There was a long moment of silence. Makstarn's ears rang, but he thought he heard something else—like the gallop of many men on mounts, racing up the road.

There was another flash, and then a fresh gust of wind. Directly ahead was the tree; it seemed to grow from under a shelf of rock. Just as they reached it, the wind slammed against them, driving them along the face of the rock, and drops of water, big and hard as pellets, struck against them. Then, with the heavy sound of thudding feet, the storm was upon them, drenching them in moments.

There was no real shelter. The rain tore through the tree overhead, and the wind drove it easily under the scant overhang of rock. Animal and human alike were battered by the heavy torrent. There was only one thing for which to be grateful: the lightning and thunder had moved on.

It grew cold, and in the wet night there was little comfort in lying close to the wolf. But yet the two huddled together in silent misery to wait the storm out.

The rain slackened to a thin drizzle at dawn, and when the wolf shifted, Makstarn awoke. He had not remembered falling asleep, but wakefulness was jarring. He looked up and out.

Across the road, steep slopes climbed toward a nearby mountain peak. The slopes were dotted with grass, scrawny trees, and bare scars of rock. The peak was hid-

den in the low cloud that hung overhead. Makstarn gasped. Until now he had not realized that they might have climbed this high—he had not dreamed one might come so close to the sky.

The rain made a soft patter upon the dripping leaves overhead, and the wolf had a wet smell he recognized from the many dreary times he had spent guarding the flock in the rain.

He felt tired and aching; he had not felt this way since resuming his journey. His wrists ached and itched, and the back of his head throbbed. He was wet clear through, and cold. He doubted his fire-making equipment would do him any good here and now. The wolf looked up at him mournfully. Its coat was matted and bedraggled. At least its mouth had healed safely.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting there. He would just have to start walking again. Exercise would help.

As the morning wore on, the rain slackened, then stopped, and to the east the sky grew progressively lighter, until at last he could see patches of pale blue.

"Enough blue sky for a shepherd's britches, and the day will be a good one," old Ishmight had sometimes said. Makstarn had never been certain of exactly how much blue sky that should actually be, but he took heart from the saying now. He only wished there was sky with which to make a dry, unsticky tunic.

They had progressed not much farther when Makstarn found the road blocked. Ahead a great tumble of rocks, boulders, and raw earth lay across their way.

Looking up the mountainside to his right, he saw the new scar. It looked as though an entire cliff had fallen down upon the road. There was a strange lingering smell in the air, a sharpness that he could not define, but which he recalled from the night before, at the outset of the storm.

He stared at the debris and rubble and wondered why *this* cliff fell and not the one under which they had

crouched during the storm. He shivered. It was no longer cold.

It was close to noon when the sun broke through and the sky cleared. Makstarn and the wolf were entering a high pass. He looked back, to the east, and it was as if a veil was pulled from his eyes.

They were very high. And, for once, there were no nearby higher ridges to the east to obscure their view.

The sun slid its rays out across the land: out over the mountains and down their eastern slopes and across the foothills to the flat bottomlands and the broad plains. In the hazy distance, the Great River winked and he could just see where the Small River joined it, a little above the land he'd called home. It was as if he stood at the roof of the world, staring down upon all the lands. He felt a god-like power, and at the same time a vast sense of awe and humbleness.

He looked back upon the road he had climbed, and watched it roll and unwind itself like a great black thread, down through the mountains and out into the distance into which it lost itself and disappeared. Had he come all this way? He shook his head in numb surprise. Here he stood at last upon the western wall: the last known landmark of the world in which he'd lived. What lay beyond? The desert was only a land of tales; no one but his own father had ever seen it within the recent memory of the tribe.

When he came through the final pass, he saw at last the great desert.

It was afternoon, the sun a white orb that hung too low for him to shield his eyes against it. And from the dazzling brightness of the desert the heat seemed to rise to smite him.

He could not actually *see* the desert. He tried to cover his eyes and peek out between two barely separated fingers, but even then his only impression was of white-

ness and glare and heat that seemed to bend the air. It was too bright. The sun was too low. Later, when the Red Moon was up, or perhaps near dawn, he would be able to distinguish the features of the desert floor. Now he could tell only that it stretched beyond the horizon. Almost reflexively, he reached for his water.

He caught his hand and paused. That was something else: water would be scarce here. He would have to conserve his water carefully. Food would be less of a problem. From his father's tales he knew that animal life could be found even here. And the wolf had survived this trek once before. If necessary, he could go several days without food. But water . . . that would be the real problem.

Water and exposure. Only standing here high in a mountain pass overlooking the desert below he felt its heat, a furnace beating upon him like the open doors of the pottery kilns when one strayed too close. He could feel his sweat being sucked into the dry air. His clothes were dry. The wolf was panting.

He looked down at the mountainside. Gone was the green vegetation that had covered its eastern slopes. As though a line had been drawn along its highest ridge, the western faces were scarred and barren, the soil dry and shaley, twisted grey shrubs the only growing things. There had been no rain here; not for a very long time. Makstarn felt again an awe for the range of the world beyond that which he had ever known.

They found a gully already deep in shadow, and slept there well into the night. Then, spending their time afoot under the cooler mantle of the moons and stars, sleeping during each progressively hotter day, they made their way along the road and down into the desert itself. It took only three days, including what was left of their first night on the western side of the range.

While still high up, Makstarn saw the desert only as a great flat and featureless expanse of grey and yellow plains. It was hard to believe anything might exist there

for long, and more than once Makstarn felt himself slowing his descent, fighting an urge to turn back. It seemed as though everything that man might treasure had been baked or burned from this desert land.

Yet, as they went lower, the shrubbery on the mountain slopes increased, and as the land below grew closer it became less and less featureless. The shrubs were small and twisted plants that resembled nothing so much as dwarfed trees. Their trunks were thick and hard—unbreakable and all but uncuttable. The bark could be peeled in shaggy strips, and there was nothing else to scavenge for cooking fires.

The leaves of the plants were a greenish silver that looked quite grey and dead from a distance. But when he picked one he found it thick and oozing with a tart-smelling ichor.

The shrubs grew larger on the lower slopes. While higher up they'd clung close to the ground, by the time Makstarn had reached the mountain's foot he found them as high as his waist.

Most curious of all, the plants never grew in clumps or patches, but were almost evenly spaced from each other, sometimes only a pace or two, sometimes six or more paces apart. And nothing grew between them. It was as though the land could support nothing else, nothing more.

The mountain itself did not descend into graduated foothills as the eastern slopes had. It fell directly to the desert floor. Perhaps the floor itself might fall off gradually beyond, but there was an almost clean demarcation between desert and mountain, and the way the road straightened out from its angling descent and pointed abruptly west only made it that much more obvious.

The road seemed in poorer repair as it struck out over the desert, and Makstarn was astonished to discover that once in the desert itself he could not see far. Like the dried mud in what had once been a mud puddle, the

floor of the desert had cracked and turned up at the edges. Here and there worn shelves of rock poked up, long strata at an angle, sharp edges abraded smooth. Gullies and dry washes cut haphazardly across the dry sand and clay, washing out and undermining the road in more than one spot.

There was no lack of vegetation, now that he could view it close to hand, but Makstarn found it singularly unappealing and almost repulsive. There was an uninviting look to this land; it seemed alien, and hostile to intruders. It denied him in his humanity, depriving him of hospitable sights, smells, or sounds. The wind seemed to scrape over the landscape, moving little runnels of sand before it that sometimes whirled into the air to dance like a toy.

During the daylight hours, the sun's heat was almost intolerable, even in the shade. His blistered skin had flaked and peeled off after its earlier exposure and burn, and no longer troubled him, but the heat here at midday was oppressive, stifling to breathe. Although he managed to find shade in which to lie and nap, he always woke when the sun was highest, and heard the wolf panting in the heat.

But there was game in the desert, and even water, if one learned how to find it. The wolf was adept at both, sniffing out the spoor of the desert animals and following their paths to water; Makstarn soon found that wherever the ground was sandy he could find the trails of small animals himself.

But the water was usually warm and unpleasant tasting, sometimes only a mud-sink into which water slowly oozed when one scraped away the sand. And the most common form of animal, as he discovered when the wolf brought him one their first night in the desert, was a small brown-furred little rodent—what his father had called a "desert pup." It was no longer than his forearm, tough and scrawny, and good for little more than a single meal.

Nevertheless, because he kept his waterskin filled

whenever possible, and stored what game he could in his pack, he neither starved nor went thirsty. And neither, he judged, did the wolf.

He had no idea of the immensity of the desert, and little awareness of the degree of change across it. Indeed, he was relying upon the wolf now, to lead him to whatever its origins might have been. For the being, the wolf seemed content to follow the road, which curved southward a little at first, and then struck due west. How far the desert might extend, and what might lie beyond it, he could not guess. But he felt charged with a new sense of adventure, newly intrigued with the strange land he was trekking across. Somewhere out here lay the secret of his father—and of the wolf. Whether in the desert, or beyond it, he did not know. But if his father had been able to make the journey—and less providently equipped than he—and the wolf as well, then he was confident.

When they had first descended into the desert, the dwarfed tree-like shrubs had grown more dense, but then they thinned once more, and gave way to a kind of plant equally alien to Makstarn's eyes.

These were tall spikes that rose cleanly from the dry soil to thrust perhaps twice his height into the air. Most varied from a thickness of between that of his arm and that of his torso, the taller ones thickest. But what impressed him was that they did not seem to taper, but climbed directly to their rounded points. Some branched, the branches looking uncannily like arms that thrust out a short ways, and then up, almost as thick as their parent trunk. The trunks of these strange plants were not smooth, but deeply scored with vertical ridges, and while some of these odd plants were smooth-skinned, others were covered with spines that grew in clusters. In the bloody moonlight, the things seemed sentinel-like, alive and brooding.

But these too thinned and then disappeared as the

land dipped a little, and grew more rocky. Now one might see small clumps of silvery bushes growing against an upthrust ledge or even from a rock shelf. They seemed to grow where shade would be available at least half the day. When one was close to one, the scent of it was like the odor of death, and Makstarn noticed that the wolf gave them wide berth. When they picked their sites for daytime shade and sleeping, Makstarn tried to avoid those places where the bushes grew.

Other plants also grew here and there, some quite small and inconspicuous. Often a stretch of land beside the road would seem quite barren of life before he turned to walk into it. Then he would find himself picking the way between small shrubs and ground-hugging plants as though following an obstacle course.

It was close to dawn of their fourth day in the desert when Makstarn first saw the wolf nibble at a plant.

He was surprised, for he had never seen the big animal eating vegetation, and had thought it purely a meat-eater. But the wolf had first sniffed at the plant, and then begun awkwardly tearing at it with its teeth, pausing now and then to chew at it with its head cocked at an odd angle, and swallow.

The plant itself was rather like a rounded piece of turf, measuring about a foot across. It looked like thick moss at first, and then Makstarn saw that it had densely growing fleshy stems that rose, in the center where they were tallest, about the length of his middle finger. He found a second growth of the strange plant a short distance away and, quite hesitantly, pulled at a stem. It gave a brittle snap, and came loose in his fingers. He brought it close to his eyes, then sniffed it. In the dim light he could not be certain, but he thought it was glistening damply at its broken end. It had no smell.

Cautiously, he bit into it. The flesh of the stem seemed to burst in his mouth, and suddenly he was swallowing a cool, refreshing, sweetish liquid. He chewed some more. The stem yielded its cool soothing juices and then was limp and stringy. He spat it our and reached for another

stem. It was some time—already the sun's rays were brimming over the mountains to the east—before they both had quenced their thirsts with the odd plants. Makstarn rubbed his forehead and yawned.

# Chapter 6

After a month in the desert, Makstarn became convinced that there was no end to it.

The desert had changed him. Although he had stayed out of direct sunlight as much as possible, his skin was burned darker, and his hair was bleached a deep copper. His skin had thickened and become leathery, his hands and feet developed tough calluses. His eyes grew to a perpetual squint, and if he were to come upon someone who had known him—something he sometimes fantasied in those drifting moments before real sleep—he would probably not be recognized. He was at once thinner and more solid. The desert seemed to have distilled in him his essences and forced him to sweat off and discard every unnecessary ounce of fat and tissue. He had gained weight on his calves, thighs, shoulders and arms. His chest was broader; the tunic was almost too snug on him now. He had lost weight from his middle, his hips and buttocks, from his neck and jowls and cheeks. He looked years older.

Scars of pale flesh banded his wrists; the scar across his face gave him a look that would forever set him apart from sheep-herders.

He had learned things from the desert. He had learned suspicion, and he had learned to take nothing for granted—even luck.

The first thing he had learned was that plants in the desert jealously guarded their water. This was not a total wasteland; it sometimes rained here during the summer —and, possibly, more often during the winter. There *was* water, if you dug for it, or knew where to look for it. Sometimes there was even water above ground. But this mostly near the mountains in the east.

The plants established claim. A plant would take root and grow, developing a root structure many times greater than that which showed above ground, and sending those roots out in all directions in search of water. There was not enough water to support another plant within that immediate area. Any plant which took root within another's established claim would die. So plants grew apart, their separateness determined by the amount of water available below ground.

Once the water was found, it would be stored within the plant in special water cells. Sometimes these cells were part of the arterial system of the plant itself, and would contain the sugars gleaned from photosynthesis in the leaf systems. Sometimes they were in separate storage reservoirs.

Usually, they would be guarded against attack from other water-seekers.

Makstarn learned that the short, fleshy-stalked plant that seemed so full of water was good to eat when dawn approached. There were two reasons. To begin with, the plants lost water during the day, and would seem half withered by dusk. But more important, they contained a substance that made him sleepy. It did not seem to affect the wolf, but soon after Makstarn would fill his mouth with the sweet water, he would feel languor creeping over him—even if it was just dusk, and he had slept the whole day.

Other plants had different protection. One had a leathery bark that was impossible to cut, and would allow the plant to be bent without breaking. Another tasted vile. And yet another sent only spindly stems of dried-looking wood above ground, but—as he discovered when he

scuffed his toe against the base of one—swelled into a barrel at the ground line.

That one he investigated. While the wolf sniffed about curiously, he dug in the dried clay around the plant and tried to estimate the size and depth of the barrel.

The plant extended only short withered twigs into the air, these terminating in clumps of thin, spiny leaves. He tried grasping the twig-like branches in a single handful and pulling, but only ripped skin from his palms in the attempt.

The wolf seemed to snort in disgust, and moved off to investigate beyond the next rock shelf.

The thing was rooted solidly in the ground. Digging again with his knife, and using a flat stone as well, he excavated a hole around the plant.

The barrel was as thick as his thigh, and seemed to be about twice that long, tapering off into a large taproot. Smaller roots radiated out from it from ground-level down. These Makstarn mercilessly cut.

Again he tugged at it. The remaining side-roots broke free, but the taproot held. He dug some more. Then he began hacking at the root with his knife.

He had begun while the sun still hung just above the western horizon. Before he finished, he was working by the thin light of the stars, neither moon yet up. Sweat poured from his body. He wondered if the plant could replace as much water as he'd lost in this effort.

Finally the thing came free. It was heavy as he tugged it up over the lip of the hole, letting it fall on its side on the ground while he regarded it.

Immediately, a stream of tiny black things began emerging from holes he'd not noticed about the top of the barrel. They were tiny insects, round-bodied, moving on almost invisible legs. They poured out like water itself. Makstarn hastily retreated from them.

With an eager bound, the wolf hopped down from the rock shelf. It approached the uprooted plant, and sniffed at the little insects. Then its tongue swept out and in one

lick it had caught the greatest number of the black swarm. Avidly, the wolf watched and waited for more to emerge, lapping them up as soon as they began to congregate in masses. Makstarn stared at him and then shook his head. He could eat a lot of things, but . . .

When he sliced the top off the barrel, he found the answer to the horde of bugs.

The plant was a symbiote. It appeared to have learned to live in a pattern of coexistence and mutual cooperation with the insects that infested it. It had created for them a cyst that had eventually swelled to barrel size, and had supplied it water.

The insects in turn had divided the barrel's interior into segmented cells, in which they went through a slow process of absorbing and secreting the water as a thin paste. The plant extended a new root network into this area, along the walls of the cells—either to add more water or to draw upon the newly supplied food, it was impossible to tell; perhaps both.

Immediately he had the top off the barrel, the wolf was at it, and he had to tug the beast back. Cautiously, he dipped a finger into a cell of paste.

It tasted at once sweet and tart, and seemed to burn a little as it went down his throat, as though strangely spicy. He did not try another sample immediately, but let the wolf poke its snout into the barrel and lick at it.

The sweet taste made him remember the plant with the sleeping-water. He wondered if this too would make him drowsy.

As he sat upon his heels, he rocked and rested, feeling the sweat still heavy on his back and brow, and the dry oppressive heat still radiating from the land about him. He looked up at the stars. In this clear air they seemed much brighter, much closer. He could distinguish colors among them, like winking jewels in the Shepherd's Cloak.

A soft breeze whiffed by him, and it felt deliciously fresh. He came lightly to his feet and felt the energy pour-

ing into his muscles. The landscape glowed under the carpeting light of the stars, and it seemed to call out to him, beckoningly.

He pushed the wolf away from the open barrel and brought out a handful of the paste. He stuffed his mouth with it, and let it dissolve to trickle intoxicatingly down his throat, spitting out the rootlets and waxy cell walls when he had sucked them dry.

A scent was on the air, spicy and fragrant. He wanted to chase after it, but a cooler part of his mind cautioned against it. He felt good; very good. He lifted the barrel and thrust it under his left arm, much to the wolf's annoyance. He laughed at the wolf; it was a comical sight, its head covered with the sticky residue of the paste. The wolf smiled up at him, its tongue slurping smugly ou and around its jowls.

They travelled a good distance that night, and did not finish the contents of the barrel until long after the new Red Moon was up, not so very long before dawn, and that night the desert was an enchanted and beautiful place.

Sleep had been no problem, but waking was. Makstarn felt sick to his stomach, and yet he could not even retch. His stomach felt knotted into a tiny ball, his throat tight and constricted.

What had happened last night? he wondered.

He looked around. It was late afternoon; he had slept through the midday heat! He was lying in a gully that undercut an upthrust finger of rock, the slab forming a nearly perfect roof for shade. His pack was under his head, and beside it a large brown object.

At the sight of it, he remembered. And as he remembered, he reached for it.

It was empty. Worse than empty: scraped bare. Only a faint spicy odor still clung to it. The odor did things to him.

The world beyond the gully looked painfully harsh; the light sent signals of pain to his brain.

His mouth watered as he stared at the empty wood-like barrel. He tasted the fragrant paste again, and his stomach seemed to relax for a moment.

He sat up, and for a moment he thought he had struck his head against the overhead shelf. The pain was sudden and shocking, like a blow. He stared down the gully, and the wolf raised its head and returned his stare. Its eyes seemed watery, and it made no attempt to rise. It made a low, almost inaudible whine. The sound hurt Makstarn's ears.

He was thirsty. He pulled the neck of the waterskin to his lips. But he could not swallow. The stuff tasted brackish, dead. He wondered if it had gone bad. Yet, he needed something—food?

He had very little left in his pack: only a few dried hunks of bread. It had been made by mashing the roots of a domesticated vine into meal and then baking it for hours. One soaked it with water, milk, or gravy. Shepherd's Bread, they called it. It was like a rock. He broke loose a few crumbs and tried to eat them. He gagged on them.

Only a few paces away, he found the familiar clump of twigs with their spiny leaves. With dogged effort he knelt in the long-shadowed sunshine and dug the plant free. Its barrel was considerably smaller—only about half the size of the first—but that simply sped the task.

Once he had it out of the ground, he returned, sweating profusely and feeling strangely chilled, to the gully. There he laid the plant on its side.

A thick wave of tiny black bugs swarmed out. The wolf raised itself on its forelegs to stare at them, then licked at them half-heartedly. And then again.

Makstarn worked almost feverishly at cutting the top off, not even waiting for all the black bugs to crawl out. A few made their way up his arms. He ignored them.

The paste tasted rich and creamy; cool and delicious. It slid down his throat like fresh curds. His body seemed at once to relax and gather strength. He looked out into the desert again. The sun was near the horizon, the sky

streaked with vivid colors. The desert itself seemed alive with rich hues of browns, yellows, reds and greys, dotted here and there with tiny moments of green. As he watched, a desert pup some forty paces off skittered out of its hole in the ground, ran a short distance, then sat up on its hind legs to survey the scene.

The wolf's ears rose. In one leap it was out of the gully and bounding out over the clay banks and sand flats.

Makstarn heard its tiny squeak of alarm and then saw the desert pup run—not toward his hole but away from it—in futile confusion. The wolf was on it all too quickly. There was a short high shriek, and the animal was dead, dangling from between the wolf's proud jaws.

Makstarn took a strong pull of water, then gnawed free a hunk of bread, alternating bites of it with handfuls of the spicy paste. When the wolf returned, he shared the stuff with that animal while it munched at the small pup.

Again it seemed to Makstarn they travelled a long distance that night. They set out early, just after dusk, and they moved with a quick stride over the road's smooth pavement. Here and there the road was less smooth, blowing sand having pitted its surface, or drifting entirely over it. But these were things of no moment, for Makstarn was full of the sights and smells and sounds of the vast, rich desert, breathing deep breaths and stretching his legs to keep pace with the almost trotting wolf. From time to time he would dip into the barrel for more paste, and then he would take more and let the wolf lick it from his fingers. The wolf was—he chuckled in delight to himself—a wolf about the stuff; he had to dole it out or it would be far too quickly finished.

For more than a week they followed this pattern, Makstarn learning to save a little of the paste for when they woke, to forestall the pains. He did not try to reason it out, but it seemed to him that this stuff, this desert nectar, had the effect of acclimating a person to the desert.

Heat seemed to have much less effect upon him. He needed less food and water, and that which he consumed he tended to use without eliminating much. He was imbued with energy and it propelled him across the desert at a startling pace.

The wolf too seemed to crave and need the stuff. Its reflexes grew sharper, its eyes and ears keener for prey, and it could cover the ground at his side for hours without either of them feeling exhaustion.

The only problem came when they ran out of the plants.

Makstarn awoke as usual, near dusk. The residual ache lay behind his eyes, but he did not think; he simply reached for the last handful of the nectar. Half he ate; the other half he gave to the wolf. It was a very sharing sort of thing. Then he rose, and began looking for a new plant.

Sometimes he had found them in clusters, sometimes widely scattered. When possible, he had learned to take one closer to the size of his second plant. It was easier to dig free, and easier to carry.

There didn't seem to be any immediately about. He climbed the outcropping of rock they'd slept against, and scanned the nearby area.

The land had changed again. It seemed to be all chipped flat plains and shelves of rock. There were few plants growing in the area . . . very few plants at all.

To the west the land seemed to dip from sight; then a low wall of rock cut across from south to north, beyond. The whole area was a reddish orange, with darker streaks that suggested exposed strata in the rocks. Overhead, the sky was purpling.

He needed the damned plant! Where was it?

That night they did not go on. Instead, Makstarn rolled himself into a tight ball and wept to himself. He wept for all the things that he did not have, for the loss of joy and happiness and life and strength. And then he

threw up what little was in his stomach, and wept for that too, tears streaming down his cracked face.

In a moment of lucidity he became aware of the wolf. It was thrashing about, its head jammed into the empty barrel. There was no point to that; he'd already cleaned it dry. The wolf was making strange noises, but he stopped hearing them.

Later his bowels let go, and his bladder, and he felt like a small boy, lying sick in his mother's tent and full of shame. He lay on his side, curled into a ball, and rocked and moaned.

It was an enlightening experience, and if it had proved only one thing, that was that a wolf can make mistaken choices in its food as easily as can a human. But this was not a point Makstarn was to dwell upon for some time.

When day dawned, the heat drove Makstarn awake.

For a long moment he wondered where he was and sensed a strange doubling of his life. He was lying naked upon the sand, abandoned by the raiders, he was lying clothed upon a crumbling rock shelf amid the effluvia of his own sickness.

Then his mind cleared, and it was a different kind of clarity than he had known for days.

His eyes felt full of grit, and his body itched with its own filth. When he stood, his legs threatened to buckle, and he shook with sudden fatigue. But he could stand. He could open his eyes. There was that.

He looked slowly around, cataloging his surroundings. Rock: barren: empty. They were not under shelter. The sun would soon be stronger.

The wolf lay stretched out on its back in an odd position, its back arched. It did not move. Flecks of white foam were still at the edges of its mouth.

For a moment he thought it dead, and his heart seemed to turn over and his stomach seize again. Then he saw the shallow movement of the animal's chest and knew that it was still breathing; still alive.

A sick odor seemed to surround the shelf. He realized that some of it clung to him. It made him feel uncomfortably unclean.

The wolf's legs made running movements in the air, and it moaned, the sudden sound loud in the empty land. Makstarn leaned over it and stroked its chest.

# Chapter 7

They sweated out the day together in what meagre shade they could find. Makstarn had felt an unpleasant shock when he discovered there was no adequate shelter from the sun. It was after all the same place in which they'd spent the previous day, and he had slept in the shade then, had he not?

He had not.

Dusty memories reawakened: he had lain against the side of a low outcropping of rock. It had cast its scant shade only in the morning hours. At midday it had been —and still would be—useless. And in the afternoon it had caught and reflected the merciless rays of the blindingly white sun.

How had he endured this?

He tried to sort his memories out, but they were weak and fragmented—they skittered off in many directions when he sought to group them and order them. He remembered momentary things: colors, sounds, smells and tastes. But like the colors scattered from a ray of sunshine by the prism of a drop of water, they were diffuse, and vanished when pursued.

Both he and the wolf were weak: tired, thin and drained of life and energy. It was as if they had each exhausted most of their bodily reserves. The wolf—had his coat not seemed rich and gleaming such a short time

ago?—was so thin and mangy in appearance that Makstarn was frightened when he looked at the beast. With each heaving breath, the wolf's ribs stood out in stark relief. Its long face was thin to the point of emaciation, cheeks sunken against its narrow skull, eyes clouded and sad beyond belief. Its tongue hung loosely from its weakly gaping jaws as it panted for relief from the heat. It raised its tail once, as if in a mordant salute—*we're in this together, brother*—then let it fall back into the dry dust with an exhausted flop.

Makstarn tried to eat, but food tasted thin and unpleasant—like meat without salt. What water he had left he sipped sparingly, after rinsing his mouth with it. He felt as if he had come through a long and fevered illness.

That evening, when the sun had fallen below the desert's western edge, he stripped off his scant clothes and scrubbed first himself and then his clothing in the dusty sand that had collected in the pockets of the rock shelves. It was less than ideal, but at least it removed some of the smell.

That night he went back up to the road and followed it the short distance west to its abrupt end.

The road led directly to the edge of a chasm. There abutments of the same black obsidian of which the road was made rose to form low walls on either side of the way. But the walls too ended at the chasm, sheered away like cleanly fractured glass. Makstarn crawled on his belly to the very edge of the chasm and peered down into it.

The road actually overhung the chasm itself by half a body's length. Makstarn gripped tightly against the weathered edges as vertigo caught him and threatened to raise up the road and tip him over. His heart raced with unexpected fear. But he made himself remain, to stare purposefully into the chasm and try to chart its details.

In the light of the Red Moon, it seemed a bottomless rift in the desert floor: the cleavage was not wide—no

more than thirty paces—but too deep for its lower depths to be visible. Directly opposite, on the other side, the road resumed again, with its low flanking walls. At one time it had bridged this canyon; now it did not.

Makstarn calmed his feverish nerves by staring fixedly at that opposite side. How to gain it? A leap—even a long, running leap—was impossible. If anything, the opposite wall of the chasm was higher. He tried to measure it with his eyes. Yes: higher. It seemed unreachable.

How had the wolf crossed it, then? *Had* the wolf indeed come from that side? Why assume that the wolf came from farther west? Or that it had followed the road as he had?

But surely, his mind replied, the wolf did not originally come from this desert. This wolf had already known man: it wore a collar. And no man lived upon the wretched face of this land.

The chasm must be crossed, then, if it could in fact be crossed. How? By the only way that remained: climbing down its walls and crossing its bottom to climb up the other side. It was a simple answer, difficult only in the execution.

He let the wolf make the choice: would they go north, or south? Unhesitatingly, the wolf turned north, setting out along the canyon's rim, nosing at those breaks in its wall which suggested the possibility of paths leading down, whining and turning back again to move further on. Could it remember its previous trail? Makstarn wondered.

Two nights' journey north brought them to a place where the canyon was wider, the walls less vertical. It had been a difficult two nights, for neither man nor beast were yet fully recovered from their experience with the pasty drug.

Finally they found a place where they could descend into the canyon. Here the shelving rock formed a series of steps down which Makstarn and the wolf carefully climbed. Daylight had revealed an even stronger reason

for reaching the canyon bottom: edging among the shadows, ducking in and out of sight, was a narrow stream of running water.

There too grew a profusion of green plants, grasses, even low trees, and Makstarn knew the uplift of hope—the hope of more abundant animal life. The canyon rim had been barren of both food and water, and they shared empty bellies now.

It took half another night to reach the bottom. Then, while Makstarn rolled about happily in the shallow water of the stream, the wolf disappeared on a hunting mission. While he waited, Makstarn rolled stones into the stream and built a simple dam to widen into a pond. His stomach still growled at him, but the water helped. The touch of it upon his skin was as satisfying as its taste. He shed the dust of many desert miles and felt cleansed and refreshed for the first time in many weeks. It was, he mused, a very different feeling than that he had known while consuming the paste, but at once as vital and more real. Colors neither glowed nor vibrated, and he felt none of the skin-tingling charge of the drug. Yet he felt alive—and glad to be alive. It was, he decided, a deeper, more basic feeling: the pleasure of the fulfillment of an elemental need.

By the time the wolf had returned, Makstarn had a fire going, and propped over it a rude pot made of bark and mud, in which he was cooking a variety of bulbs and tubers—roots dug from the stream bank where the foliage flourished most luxuriantly. Among them were a pungent-smelling rush which reminded him of the leeks which grew along the river at home. Also in the pot were a handful of small snails, plucked from among the thick grasses. The wolf brought back a rodent which looked like a younger cousin to the desert pups upon which they'd been subsisting. The beast dropped its catch before Makstarn and sat back on its haunches to look up to him for approval. Makstarn reached out to rumple the wolf's fur at its neck and the back of its head and then

the animal nodded, an almost human bow of recognition, and turned to pad away once more into the night.

Makstarn skinned the rodent, cleaned it, and added it to his stew. Life was incredibly profuse here; he wondered if this canyon bottom was not some sort of hidden oasis in the harsh clime of the desert. Could men live here? And might they not? But, he admitted to himself, if they did they left no signs. And that he regarded as unlikely.

They spent two days on the canyon floor, eating and resting and regaining their health. The tall walls of the canyon cast ample shade at all but the noon hour, water and game were plentiful, and somehow Makstarn found himself at peace in this place, loathe to move on. He washed and mended his clothes, working over them with needle and thread, his fingers clumsy but increasingly adept. Necessity makes the best teacher. The wolf, as if it too was aware that they must stock up here for the journey that lay yet beyond, spent long hours hunting the small rodents, bringing them to Makstarn one after another. No, if man had lived here, the pickings would never have been so good. And even they must soon exhaust the bounty—desert ecology and oasis ecology no less hangs in a delicate balance. To stay here too long would be to ravage it.

Makstarn kept his stewpot going continually, adding new meat and vegetables as he served himself each meal. The extra meat he cut in thin strips, salted, and laid out on racks of green wood over the coals of a separate fire, to which he added green grass for the smoke. Dried to lightweight crisps, the meat although uncooked would keep indefinitely in this hot dry climate, and made an ideal meal to be slowly chewed while afoot.

And so it came to pass that at last they made their assent upon the western wall of the canyon, even the wolf eager to resume the journey, and they gained again the barren face of the desert veering south towards an eventual rendezvous with the road.

Two weeks later, Makstarn sighted the western rim of mountains. He had been a long time in the desert now; indeed, the season was shifting. He had seen it first in the stars, as the southern constellations began moving closer to the horizon until at last they had dipped from sight, and then confirmed it in the shorter days and longer nights. The summer was drawing to a close, and the dark hours were becoming comfortably cooler.

At first he thought it was a cloudbank on the horizon. He had seen clouds occasionally in the sky. Indeed, he'd seen rainstorms—long ways away. Clouds would sometimes drift across the hot dry land trailing dark columns of water and flashing tiny sparks of lightning, but never coming close, never passing over his head. Rain on the desert was an isolated phenomenon.

But he remembered from the fund of stories his mother had passed on from his father the tale of the great storm which had swept the desert, producing floods and leaving a sudden growth and flowering of every variety of plant in its wake. That storm had been no solitary raincloud, sprinkling its water daintily upon scanty patches of land. It had rolled over his father with all the fury—he suddenly made the association—of the storm which had caught him in the eastern mountains.

For a time he had reflected upon that thought with a feeling not unlike pride. They'd shared those experiences, he and his father. It was a common tie. "As the father, so also the son," old Ishmight had sometimes mumbled. And the desert, too: they alone had braved its inferno wastes. Yes, it was something to think about: in a curious way he was finding his father—within himself.

It was not a cloudbank. It remained too low, too fixed. Each dawn it was there, and again when he awakened at dusk, the sun a fat yellow blob settling behind it. And eventually he saw it for what it was: a ridge of mountains that travelled the entire width of the horizon, north to south.

His feelings, when he confirmed the fact of the mountain range, were not as he'd expected. He had spent

months crossing this vast inland desert, and he might have felt joy to see the desert's end in sight. But he felt a curious sense of disappointment; it was almost an anticlimax. He had anticipated something more . . . He had, before ever seeing the desert, without knowing it as more than a land of legend, expected something mysterious of it. What? A revelation? He did not know. Answers, perhaps, to questions he did not know how to voice.

And it had been only a desert.

At last the rim of the western mountains stood high before him, brown, with distinct ridges visible where once had stood only a vague blue-purple sawtooth on the horizon. And the irony left a bitter taste in his mouth, because here at last, this close to his goal, he had come to his end.

He lay weakly against a hard ledge and stared with unfocused eyes at the panting wolf. He faced west. Toward the mountains. The inaccessible mountains.

The road climbed steadily into the near distance towards the mountains' feet. The end was in sight—unreachably in sight.

He belched, his breath fetid. He had been belching for two days, his stomach in revolt against the treatment he had accorded it. His skin felt dry, loose and scaly. The sun was peeping over the ledge at his back, but its heat brought forth no sweat from his itching skin.

It had been a hard journey, these last few days. The land was bleak, criss-crossed in random patterns with upthrust veins of porous black rock. Nothing seemed to grow here; the land was hard, all silica and lava. When he left the road to seek shelter from the sun the rock slashed his feet. There was no trace of water. They'd seen no animal life in nine days, no water for six days. He'd shared the last of his dried meat with the wolf three days ago. His waterskin had been empty for two days, and for that last day it had held urine, brown and bitter, not water.

His mind felt fuzzy and indistinct. Water starvation had reached his brain. When he moved his hand to the knife at his belt, he did so without real strength and he fumbled it, losing it in a clatter on the rocks. They had come but a short way this last night. And several times he had stumbled and fallen, to rise without knowledge of where he was or how he'd come to be there. He had focused his attention upon the road, fixing it as a simple directive: *keep to the road. Keep going and stay on the road.* Once he had glanced at the stars and felt a vast confusion before he slowly realized that he'd turned around; he was walking east. A sharp illuminating clarity of mind had possessed him for a time then, and he had known that no hope lay back along that way. They could never retrace their steps in time, never make that last mud sink before dropping dead upon the road. Hope, or what remained of it, lay westward.

Death did not frighten him. That was not what frightened him.

He hugged himself against the cramp of hunger that momentarily seized him. He picked up the knife again and poked with it half-heartedly at the rocks. There were no loose stones here to be tipped over. He remembered how, three days ago, the wolf had pawed and snuffled at a large flat rock. When at last he understood the animal's message, he had gotten his hands under it, strained it up and tipped it over, hoping to fine a lizard or a snake. Instead there were only a few white grubs, no more than a single knuckle in length and only a handful in quantity. The wolf had paused to look at him, as if offering him the first opportunity. When he had not taken it, the wolf lapped most of the grubs up with its tongue and then turned to look at him again. *Don't you want any?* its eyes had said, and Makstarn, no longer able to afford the luxury of fastidiousness, had scooped them wiggling into his hand, gagged, and then forced them into his mouth. Surprisingly, they had little taste, a sort of sweet wateriness, and once he'd swallowed them he wished for more. He'd even tilted up other stones in

the area, without luck. The wolf had sat upon its haunches regarding him without enthusiasm. It had found what there was to be found: its sensitive nose had scouted out all there was to be had, here. Further rock tipping was a waste of time, and nothing more.

It still was—and there were no rocks to be tipped here. Only solid slabs joined implacably to each other.

He looked again at the wolf, the memory stirring him: he loved the wolf. His eyes stung, but no tears came. He had long since ceased to regard the wolf as just a large animal, an overgrown dog or a pet. The wolf was his companion, his friend, his partner. The wolf had helped nurse him back to life, had accepted his ministrations in its time of need, and even gone upon that binge of intoxication with him. It had gone with him, uncomplaining, into the desert: a desert it must have known better and cared for far less than Makstarn had. The wolf had been the hunter, the provider. Without his crossbow, Makstarn was no match for the wolf as a hunter, and scant use to it.

In truth, the wolf had been responsible for seeing Makstarn this far across the savage desert. Without the wolf he doubted he would have understood half so much about desert survival, or come nearly so far.

Which only made the task he contemplated more difficult, more frightening.

He wanted to cry, to feel the tears of innocence and childhood once more. But he could not cry. His eyes were dry and burning.

He held the knife loosely in his hand and hefted it. The bright untarnished metal gleamed in the sunlight.

Another day upon them. More heat. The air was sucking them dry. The wounds and abrasions on his feet and knees were black: they had not bled. The blood was too thick, too sluggish to bleed freely. They could not survive. Perhaps the wolf might last a little longer than he, but neither could go on, and they both must surely die here.

The choice must be made. He knew that. But he could not face it. Not yet.

He wished his mind would work more clearly. The decision demanded it, but he could not think. A memory flaunted itself: food. He belched, a dry hot breath of fetid air. Odd his stomach should feel so heavy now.

He turned his dulled gaze back at the wolf, whose stare he had been avoiding. The wolf looked back at him, and he began to hallucinate . . .

The wolf was standing up, pushing itself up onto its hind legs, changing as it did so into a man, wearing the skin of a wolf. The man was not tall, but he was broad-shouldered and thick-waisted, his chest a barrel that rose and fell as he breathed heavily in the heat. Makstarn stared at the man's face and recognized in it a reflection of his own, but older.

"Father," he cried out. "Is it really you?"

"*Yes, my son,*" the man answered. "*It is I. I have been with you this long time, guarding you, guiding you along the difficult path you have chosen. And you have made the right choices. You must not falter now.*"

"But—father!" he cried in anguish. "I can't! Not—you!"

"*You must.*"

"But I came to this place seeking you!"

"*And you have found me.*"

"It is not—right!"

"'*Right*'? *That is a man's word. It is not a word this land recognizes. You are bound here by the rules of the land, not the rules of men.*"

"I—cannot," Makstarn said. "I must obey the rules of my heart."

"*Then you must die. And here I will die with you. For only one can live to survive beyond this spot. One must take the life of the other, that he can live. You know this. There is no other choice—only this one: which shall die? That is what you must decide.*"

"But—if I should kill . . . you . . . I would lose all

that I sought," Makstarn pleaded, knowing he was pleading not with his father but the inexorable rule of the land, against which there could be no pleading. He was pleading with the rock and the sun and the empty air.

"*As you live, so shall I live within you,*" his father told him. "*When you die, I too shall vanish at last from this world, so very far from my own.*" And as he said this, he sank down into a squatting position and then laid himself forward on the hot rocky ground to become once more the wolf . . . and the waking dream faded.

Only the decision remained.

One must be sacrificed for the other's life. Only one could survive. Only if one of them furnished the other with the necessary food and liquid, prolonging the survivor's life, could either one of them chance reaching the close by mountains. In order for one to live, the other must die. It was as simple as that.

He stared with fascinated horror at his gleaming knife. It seemed to turn itself over and over in his unwilling fingers.

One of them must die. Or both would die.

Which one? It was his decision.

Suicide—or murder?

The sun rose higher in the sky, and the day grew hotter.

# PART TWO

## Chapter 8

Lorex, First Captain of the Eastern Arath Expeditionary Force, flexed his wings in annoyance.

A peculiar land, this. No proper coastal lowlands at all. Set anchor in a rocky cove, run your landing skiff up as close as the surf would allow, and then fly the lines in until you find something solid.

It would be easier to fly in without the skiff, but a sixty-pound pack on your back played hell with your center of gravity and wore your wings out in moments, even if it somehow—most unlikely!—managed to allow your wings freedom of movement.

And now, riding these clumsy bovine creatures with their slow, plodding and uncertain temper, riding an undulating jounce that slammed against your seat until you were beyond ordinary pain, riding these stupid mounts up and down, under and over the rolling hills that nestled against the mountains—arghhh! Too much!

Again he whipped his wings, sweeping them out in full span, thrusting down hard. For a moment he rode above the saddle. Then it slammed up under him again. He cursed, fluently, in the forbidden language of the Jagara.

*Patience, my One,* said Loroloth to him alone. *You will startle the mount.*

*Yol, the mount!* was Lorex's reply. At that the crea-

ture's horns dipped, and it came to a full stop. Lorex pitched forward against the cantle, and cursed again. These humans! It was a measure of their unreasoning ignorance that they chose to ride such beasts as these oxen.

A stiff breeze came up off the ocean, and a rift appeared in the low fogbank ahead. A wispy shaft of sunlight struck the hill to the right and dense streamers of mist rose from it. In another moment the sunlight was gone again.

Lorex's heart ached for the lush green lands of the Arathdom, for the still-tall abandoned cities in which he'd flown as a youth. He yearned for the freedom of his innocence then, and for the light and supple body that had so freely drifted the wind currents of the skies.

Alas, that all time must pass. He had Loroloth now to whisper in his private ear its words of wisdom and conscience. But he was all but earthbound, and now too far beyond his homeland to even be certain of seeing it again.

"Ho!" came the shout from ahead, and Loroloth spoke to him, saying, *It is one of the scouts. A village lies ahead.*

Lorex kicked the ox, and it raised its head and looked back over its shoulder at him. A clump of grass, a clod of earth hanging from it, was half in the creature's mouth. "Move, idiot!" Lorex said tiredly.

*Give the order for the cloaks,* he told Loroloth. He folded his own wings against his back and threw his blue cloak over them, clasping it at his throat and pulling the hood over his head. It was heavy, uncomfortable and confining. Ahead and behind the other winged men of the Eastern Arath Expeditionary Force shook free and swirled their own brightly colored cloaks over their backs.

As Lorex suffered the indignities of riding the ox down through the valley toward the village he did not present an unattractive appearance. Tall, taller by a head than most humans when standing, Lorex was typical of an Arath. His hair might, at first, be mistaken for black, but

when bright sunlight struck it, it was a deep electric blue, with pearlescent highlights. His hair grew close to his skull as well, tapering off down his neck toward the vee of his shoulder blades and wings. If one was to run a hand through his hair another oddity might become obvious: each strand of hair was short and broad-bladed, like a blade of grass. Tiny hooks grew along their sides, interlocking parallel hairs. And, although his wings were now shrouded, they too were covered with the same blue hair, broader-bladed, like feathers.

Lorex's features were narrow and sharp, but no more so than those of his fellow Arath. His body was likewise thin, but supple and giving the appearance of wiry strength.

Under the heavy cloak and hood, blue for his station, Lorex wore the garb of all the Arath on this expeditionary force: knee-length boots of light leather, tight-fitting breeches of finely woven cloth, and a vest-like garment that was made up of a yoke that went over head and shoulders. These were light clothes, for the Arath were not accustomed to a climate as humid and cool as that which they had found here.

Lorex kicked his stolid mount until it advanced to the front of the column, and surveyed the village.

It appeared typical of the villages he had seen thus far, differing from the previous three only in minor details. A high wooden stockade surrounded a score or a few less log-made buildings. These buildings were laid out around a central square, where the village's population could gather when holding meetings. Beyond the stockade were rows of cultivated fields and a few pastured animals.

Lorex led his men down the slope along the rutted road towards the waiting group of humans.

He drew the ox to a halt, and immediately the beast dipped its head to search for graze. Lorex held out his right hand, palm upward, in the gesture he had learned indicated peace.

"Greetings, and may abundance in all good things be your fortune," he intoned.

One of the humans separated himself from the knot of waiting men. He was tall and broad of body. His hair and beard were deep red, and he wore the simple brown breeches and tunic of the villagers. He nodded and raised his own hand in the same gesture. "And the same for you, my brother," he replied. "May I ask your business?"

Lorex leaned forward. "We are travellers," he said. "Pilgrims. We seek the legendary lost city of Shorgot. Have you knowledge of it?"

The villager seemed shrewd, but good-natured. To Lorex's ear his tones were genuinely regretful as he shook his head and said, "Not here. There is no Shorgot here—no lost cities in our legends."

Lorex sighed. Either there was a single conspiracy among all the villagers he had thus far spoken to, or knowledge of the city was indeed lost completely.

What little they knew of Shorgot was that it lay on the western coast of this continent, at the foot of a great mountain chain. Yet, here indeed stood high mountains, but nary a trace of the once mighty city.

"Night comes upon us. May we have your permission to set up camp outside your walls?"

The other nodded, as though pleased that this at least was in his power to offer. "Indeed you may. May I assume you are the leader of these men?"

Lorex agreed.

"Then I invite you to enjoy the hospitality of my house."

Lorex put the silent question to Loroloth, obtained its assent, and accepted.

He felt uneasy among these humans, cut off from his own kind, only Loroloth providing the comforting link. Starkover was not an inhospitable host, but it was difficult to maneuver things so that he could seat himself

in Starkover's single ground-floor room without either removing his cloak or revealing his wings.

He had not cast back his hood until safely indoors. Here in the ruddy light of the huge fireplace, his hair would probably not attract undue attention.

It was so difficult to move easily among these canny humans without arousing their suspicions and their latent hostilities. The plague had obviously left them with no records of their past and little civilization; their social structure even now, some two thousand years later, was rudimentary, primitive. And when a man fights his environment for survival, he is too often deeply suspicious of that which is strange and different. It was important, Lorex knew, that he incur their good will if later relations among the Arath and the humans were to be peaceful. First contacts were trying.

The room was large, its walls hung with heavy rugs, its corners in shadows. The narrow windows—too narrow for a man to slip through, and perhaps too narrow for an Arath—were shuttered for the night. The floor was of smoothed and time-polished planks, and divided by a long table. On the side on which he sat were stools and benches. On the other side, the fireplace, before which several women moved briskly, preparing the night's meal. A shoat was turning slowly upon a spit.

Starkover had a large family, Lorex discovered, although apparently no larger than was customary here. Those he had been introduced to were Mari and Marta, his two wives, and Sten, Hobb and Vart, his three sons by Marta. Marta was a smiling, broad-girthed woman of indeterminable age; her sons were big and broad-shouldered like their father. Mari was young, young enough to be Starkover's daughter, in fact. Lorex did not inquire but from what he knew of these coastal folks' customs, it was not considered unusual to take a second wife to bear more children when the first became barren. Also, apparently by custom, he was not introduced to either of Starkover's daughters, shy girls in their middle adolescence, who never looked at him.

They passed the time in conversation, Lorex telling what news he had gleaned of the villages he had passed through, in exchange for meaningless tidbits of gossip that he would no doubt be required to disgorge from his second memory in the next village they came to. But it was an important function, this telling of news; it made him one of them, a sharer of tidings and knowledge. And it certainly helped him in his vital acquisition of customs and mores.

"Melman, of the Village, next south," he said, "speaks of a new crop he has grown. A grain that seems more resistant to rot and mildew. He seems willing to barter some seed, following harvest."

"Ah . . . " Starkover nodded. "That would be the thing he has been after the last some years, then. Perhaps we should speak with him about it."

"Father," it was Sten, young but already bearded like his father. "If you will recall, we sent him two young oxen, not four years ago, when his were stolen by that band of thieves?"

Starkover nodded. "It might not bring harm to remind him of it."

Lorex digested that and then spoke smoothly. "Ah, then it is to you that we are indebted, indirectly. The thieves were caught, you see, by Melman's son Kover. And while all that could be identified were returned to their owners, Melman found himself with some few extra oxen, none it was obvious, that could compare with those new ones he had obtained from you. No good for plowing at all after their mistreatment by the band of thieves. He graciously gave them to us for far less than they had once been worth."

Starkover beamed, happily. "They were out of my prize ox, those two. Better shoulders and more willing at a harness it would be hard to find."

Privately Lorex doubted that the finest ox in the world was worth wasting such praise upon, but he said, aloud, "Melman states that his are the envy of his village."

And in this fashion he passed the time.

The meal was a good one: heavy on rich foods and fat-bespattered meat. And if Lorex had seemed an undernourished man by village standards, he at least demonstrated that this was not the fault of his eating habits. He ate twice as much as the next man at the table, while Starkover laughed in appreciation and Marta clucked her tongue and scurried to get more. The humans here prided themselves on their ability to eat, and Lorex was bemused to note the extent to which he gained stature among them by demonstrating his normal appetite.

There was little talk after dinner. Quite shortly Mari led Lorex up the stairs that hugged the back wall, and up a second flight to the third floor.

Here was another single large room, but the slope of the eaves kept him from straightening until he was near the center of the room. It was an attic, a place for the storage of unneeded but still possibly useful items, and for the occasional bedding down of guests. Mari left the lampholder, candle still burning, on a simple plank table beside the bed, curtseyed, and quickly went down the stairs again.

Lorex reached under his cloak and removed the light cell from his belt. Turning it on, he flashed the strong beam around the shadowed eaves. No windows, no other entrance or exit. Snug enough, it would have to do.

The bed was a rude affair, a mattress stuffed with ancient straw over woven leather straps attached to the wooden frame. It was set low to the floor. He tested it with his hand, and the wood and leather squeaked, while the straw, well matted, resisted as firmly as a stone slab.

He unclipped his belt, and laid it on the floor, just under the bed. Then he removed the cloak entirely, and stretched out his cramped wings. At full span, they reached a length twice his height and brushed the low roof. He flexed them a few times, then let them fold once more against his back. He yawned. Then, rolling himself in the cloak, he lay down upon the bed and blew out the candle.

*Wake up!*

He was lying upon his stomach and he gulped a sudden deep breath, all but choking upon the dust from the straw.

*Quiet. Someone has come up the stairs.*

His senses were fully awake now. In the stillness of the night he could hear stealthy movement somewhere just beyond the bed.

He did not move, but lay silent, waiting the next move.

A hand touched his leg, and moved lightly up it.

He waited, then turned suddenly, his hand flashing out to catch a smaller hand.

"Oh!" It was a female voice.

"Who—?" he asked, his voice low.

"Cilla," came the reply. "You do not know me . . . I brought you food . . ."

One of Starkover's daughters, then.

"Why?"

"Please, don't hurt me so. I—I wanted to come and, and be with you."

He felt the bed shift, and then her body was pressing against his hip and he guessed she had sat down next to him.

"Let's have some light," he said, and fumbled on the floor for his belt. It took a moment, then he found his flame-sparker and lit the candle. His own light cell might upset the girl.

In the soft glow that sprang up he saw that she was the younger of the two girls. It was difficult to properly estimate the age of young humans, but he guessed she had entered puberty only a year or two earlier. He remembered her as slender, her body still slim where in a few years it would not be.

Her hair caught the candle's light and glinted copper gold; her face was young and open and wide-eyed. Her body was nude.

That was interesting. He had been wondering about

these humans: just how far did resemblances go? Both races were mammals, of course, but . . .

She looked so nakedly helpless that he smiled at her. She made him think of a beautiful soft moth that had somehow lost its wings. She looked crippled without wings; she was as slender and beautiful as an Arath.

"Why have you come to see me, child?" he asked again, his voice more gentle.

She looked down, away from his eyes. "Because . . . because you are tall and beautiful and I believed you would be . . . kind to me."

He took her hands again, this time in his own. "You've not been with a man before?"

"No. But," she suddenly blurted, "Sif has!"

"Sif? Your sister?"

She nodded. "With a boy. She said she . . . she wanted to do it again, but with a man." Cilla looked up. "You are a man. Please take me. Teach me."

"I can't Cilla," he told her.

"But—please!" She threw herself forward against him, her arms slipping under his, her mouth awkwardly searching his face.

Her lips were small, but soft and warm. They trembled, and he could feel the whole of her coltish young body shaking against him. His lips parted involuntarily. Her skin was so smooth, her shoulders so naked . . .

Suddenly she screamed. He had no warning. One moment her lips were moving eagerly against his, the next they were gone and her scream was piercing his ears.

She pushed away from him even as he sat bolt upright on the low bed, and without Loroloth to tell him, he knew what had happened. His cloak fell free, and now, reflexively, his wings fluttered. Her eyes were wide with terror and her face distended as the screams kept shrieking from her throat.

*That tears it,* he thought. *Wake up Cirex and see if he can help get me out of here.*

# Chapter 9

There had been a time when the winged people of Arath had worn no clothes to guard against the elements, and had known no society beyond the family nest. They lived in the mountain heights that overlooked the broad and fertile lowlands that stretched eastwards to the sea that spanned half the world, and they fought the primal battle for food and survival.

The land of the Arath lay in a wide strip that ran north and south along the eastern edge of the greatest continent on Qanar. A great chain of mountains formed a natural barrier to the west, while the sea bounded the land on the east. To the far north lay only grim lands of stone, and, further, perpetual ice, while to the south the mountains ran almost to the booted tip of the continent. The humans had penetrated only this, the southernmost and least effective barrier, and then only a short way north through the lowlands.

No Arath knew the origins that shrouded the enmity between human and Arath, although there were legends . . .

One such legend spoke of Wessil the Brave, who, it was said, took as mate a female from among the humans. The woman bore him winged children, but the humans never forgave her for spurning her own kind, and thereafter

hunted down and killed the Arath where they could, paying special attention to the young.

In turn, the introduction of human blood into the Arath brought mixed blessings, portending both the greater intelligence, and greater size of modern Arath who were rarely able to fly to any extent after late adolescence.

The early Arath had spent most of their waking time seeking prey. Their metabolisms more than twice that of the humans; they consumed great quantities of food, matured faster—adolescence began in the eighth year—and had a life-span of no more than forty years, on those rare occasions when one lived out his years. While no match for primitive humanity with its already relatively sophisticated tools, the Arath still had the advantage of flight, of being able to launch an attack from above, swooping down out of the sky. Indeed, it was said that some humans believed the Arath stole human babies in this way, and then fed them special herbs to give them wings and turn them against their own kind.

It is doubtful the Arath would ever have evolved as a race had not their land been isolated from the rest of Qanar to begin with; it is far more likely that they would have died as a race at the hands of the humans if a miracle had not occurred.

*And this was the first day of the miracle:*

Attu became vastly annoyed. His nestlings would not keep their hands from him. Without looking back, he swept out a wing and cuffed them free. He swallowed, then tore another strip of meat loose from the toth-leg on which he was working.

Such noise! Such jabberings! They kept screaming.

The screams were too loud. Startled he looked up at last.

Overhead a new sun filled the sky with brightness.

He looked to the east, where the sun should be.

It was there, still crimson in the morning mists.

Above: a blinding white sun that shrieked.

Gathering up what he could of the toth, he made gestures at his young to follow his example, then took wing quickly from the jungle floor.

As he climbed into the air, circling, he watched until all five were ascending after him, then threw himself into an updraft and began his glide for the mountain rock.

The sounds filled his ears now, and he could not escape them. His heart pounded fiercely in his fright and he began pumping his wings to add speed to his flight.

The bright light was lower, now: closer. And the sounds beat against his brains so that he slipped, crazily, and for a moment plunged directly for the thick foliage below. His children swooped and followed him, imitating his every soaring movement as they had been taught . . . or perhaps they too were stunned by the tormenting sounds.

Then, quite before he could believe it, the light was below him, settling into a clearing not two miles away, the frightening screams had died, and where a sun had been there was now only a pinnacle of rock.

Thus came the Lothian from space.

It was days before any of the Arath would approach the new tower that thrust its way above the jungle. And when they did, it was with stealth and care, and after dusk when the mists settled and they could glide the wind currents all but invisible.

What they saw must have astonished them, for it appeared that the strange artifact was filled with wingless creatures like those humans who had made war upon them. These new creatures were shorter and broader of body, but set about making a camp in ways which were all too familiar.

They caught Attu two weeks later. He had thought himself safely distant from their camp, and had settled down to investigate the freshly dead toth lying on the ground, when suddenly he was caught in a mesh, a web which enveloped him and trapped his spreading wings.

He was brought into the camp by four of the wingless men, slung between them on a pole in his net.

The camp was greatly changed. Where before there had been a grassy veldt bordered on one side by a small river, and on the other by low, broad-leaved trees, there was now a bustling village. Strange domes sat here and there. Roads of shimmering black stretched out from the center point of the gray pinnacle that had been a sun and connected the brightly lit domes. Strange vehicles moved about on the black roads, sighing as they swept past, and throwing up gusts of wind. They carried Attu to one of the domes, and there put him in a cage and left him.

If Attu lacked the intelligence of the humans, he did not lack cunning. He inspected the cage carefully, bar by bar, and found none he could slip between and none that would loosen. This task took some time. He had only been resting a short time thereafter when he heard the sounds of his captors approaching. Immediately he threw himself to the floor of the cage, one wing outspread, the other bent awkwardly. He lidded his eyes until he could only squint out into the room.

Sounds of running feet, feet that moved suddenly into his range of vision. Jabbering sounds that might carry alarm in their tone. Then another jabbering, this time muffled and distant-sounding. It came from a black box that seemed to be pointed at the cage.

The feet stopped and came no nearer.

More jabbering. And yet more. Attu gave up and fell asleep.

He awoke when he felt their hands upon him. Something at the base of his spine felt very cold. He tried to rise, to fling out his arms or wings.

He could not move. His body was limp in their hands. Tears came to his eyes. Now he was truly frightened. They had stolen some of his life.

They carried him out of the cage, to a long bench in

the room, on which they laid him. Then they began doing things to his body, things that made no sense. They were not killing him. They were not preparing him to be eaten. It was beyond his experience and understanding.

Finally, two more of them came in. They were all short, with lizard-like flat-faced heads that fitted their shoulders without apparent necks, and their bodies were wrapped with curious brown coverings. But the two newcomers had coverings of blue, and these they removed from their shoulders and backs. For Attu the sight was upsetting, but he could not move or protest.

What followed was far worse.

Each of the two sat on a nearby bench, back to back. Their shoulders seemed to touch.

Something reddish-gray and pulsing appeared on the skin of their backs, oozing from out of their very pores. The two protoplasmic fingers reached out, swaying and touched. As they touched, they blended, flowing together. Then they separated, as one unit, from the backs of their hosts, and fell on the bench with a soft, wet *plop*.

One of the others leaned over and scooped up the still-pulsing mass in his hands and carried it around and behind Attu. Then the Arath felt the warm, living mass settle wetly on the concavity between his shoulders.

He felt totally frightened, and yet he could do nothing. He felt like the maru-bird, faced with a large lizard and frozen by fear. He felt the *thing* upon his back tingle against his skin, and the weight begin to lessen.

Warmth and peace stole over him then, and tranquility invaded his mind. Suddenly he was aware that he was not to be killed; that these were not his enemies, but ones he could *trust*.

He glided easily into a deep sleep.

Thus, the first symbiosis effected between the Lothian and the Arath; the beginning of a relationship that was to change the course of life for the entire planet of Qanar.

For Attu, the change was personal and profound. It was the joining of his own primitive instincts with the intellect of what he could only regard as his own personal god.

Attu-Loth, the symbiotic creature which had merged its cells with his own, was an intelligence, a sophisticated creature which had evolved on a distant world with the unintelligent primates of its land who possessed the physical capability of wielding tools. In the long evolution of its race, it had known many bodies of many primate races, some backward and of little brain capacity, others fully intelligent or capable of high intelligence. In the process of fusion and fission in which it reproduced, it shared cells with all of its race, cells that carried memories back into primordial slime and allowed it direct—telepathic—contact with all the Lothian not too distant.

For Attu-Loth, the first task was to set up a rapport with this winged creature. Tests and observation had shown it both possessed of some native intelligence and compatible to the chemistry of the Lothian. It was unique among all the primates the Lothian had known in that it was winged and could fly. But this, Attu-Loth soon perceived, was no great blessing, for the demands made by flying had kept the winged race too obsessed with hunting food to develop any real society or civilization.

There was little real language. It would appear that Attu shared a limited vocabulary with his mate and children—sired at a rate of one every year or a little less—and an even more limited one with other Arath of his acquaintance. It was doubtful that he could exchange more than the most basic information-conveying sounds with more distant winged men.

It was initially discouraging, but at the same time challenging. It would open an entirely new area of experience to the Lothian, and Attu-Loth experienced an impatience that was quite rare to its placid race as it filtered through Attu's memories of flight in the air.

Only a few centuries later, the Arath, hooded and cloaked, betraying neither wings nor identity, set up the trading city of Iala, at the southernmost tip of the continent. There, they met with the humans, to barter the scientific knowledge of the Lothian for artifacts and produce. There was no real reason to carry on this trade with the humans; the Arath benefitted only superficially. But it was a way in which they could implement the natural spread of technology and civilization across the planet without the Lothian growing more involved in the affairs of the world than they cared to be.

For the Lothian were a benevolent species, and while they had perceived a definite good arising from their partnership with the winged Arath, they had no taste for meddling with the society of the planet as a whole, beyond those subtle and indirect ways in which they made contact with the human traders in Iala.

A few among the Lothian attached themselves to humans and roamed the greater world of Qanar freely, but the Lothian were without ambition to gain control of human society.

It followed, therefore, that the humans seized upon the science brought to them from the stars and traded them by the secretive Arath, and came in time to regard it as their own, building great black roads across the face of the planet and gliding along them in vehicles which cloated upon the air, erecting tall cities, developing many arts, and then, suddenly, in a breakthrough none of the Lothian had foreseen, inventing the matter-transmitters.

All too quickly the sparsely settled planet was linked by portals that made communication and transportation between cities instantaneous, and the population clustered even more to the cities where the marvelous devices existed. No matter if the human scientists only partially perceived the principles upon which the transmitters worked; no matter if there was a rare instance of a person who stepped into a portal . . . and never ap-

peared at his destination. The planet was linked by the devices, and civilization grew daily more sophisticated.

Within the domain which their ancestors had fought to hold and keep and to which no human was ever permitted, the Arath too built cities, a network of roads, a spaceport for the ships of the Lothian, and even a separate transmitter system.

Arath grew to develop a culture that reflected the twin heritage of Arath and Lothian: a culture rich in the arts of both the Arathdom and the many other worlds to which the Lothian had privy. Arath captains went out to space, and the sons of many of the Lothian's partner races mingled freely in the cities of the Arathdom.

The disaster struck. And as before, a visitor from space was to change the entire face of Qanar.

This one was the Plague.

*And this, the first day of disaster:*

Captain Qeebar-En brought the mighty starship screaming down on her atmospheric thrusters, and reflected on the fact that the beginning and ending of a space voyage were not only the most difficult, but the most unpleasant and the most time-consuming portions of the trip. It was not his first occasion to contemplate this fact. Once above the atmosphere and in relatively empty space, one could activate the modified transmitter—the Arath's own contribution to Lothian science—and be instantly in another sector of space. On the ground this would cause an implosion upon departure and he shuddered to consider the results if one materialized in the vicinity of any solid object—such as another ship, or a port-facility.

It was a shame no one had yet found a way to use the transmitters themselves over interstellar distances; certainly it was theoretically possible. Theoretically, the transmitter devices negated all space, and anywhere was instantly available—as though every portion of the uni-

verse overlapped somehow. It could be expressed in pure math; visualizing it made his head ache.

*The touchdown will be over soon,* came the thought from Qeebanloth. Its thoughts were calming him as always when frustrations mounted in him. Nonetheless, he dreamed often of being the man who would bring true portal-travel to the stars. Instant and immediate access to all the Civilized Worlds—! Why, that would make it possible for him to vacation if he wished upon the fabled planet Greensward, or soar in the endless winds of Jagara, or—

*Bask at home amid all the pleasant worries of raising your family, unemployed,* came Qeebanloth's mildly sardonic comment.

His eyes went back to the control panel. The print-out chattered. Last braking orbit. Going down. Good.

Captain Qeeban-En never lived to see his family. As he stepped from the ship to solid ground and flexed his wings in the open air, he breathed deeply and inhaled a micro-virus, a spore-cluster that had attached itself to the ship some eight-hundred-light years away.

The spores had already begun rapid multiplication upon contact with the humid, oxygen-rich atmosphere. Once within Qeeban's respiratory tract and settled into the mucus linings of his nose, mouth and throat, they bred explosively, quickly moving into his lungs, inner ears, sinoid cavities, digestive tract, brain, and other organs.

Qeeban-En coughed, his breath catching peculiarly in his throat, making him wheeze. His skin began tingling as it hadn't since Qeebanloth had joined him, and a deep flush spread across his face and down his neck. A wave of nauseating weakness struck him and he fell to his knees.

*My One! What is happening to you?*

Qeeban began choking for breath, his wings fluttering against the smooth black pavement of the landing port.

The Lothian quested with its own cells, extending

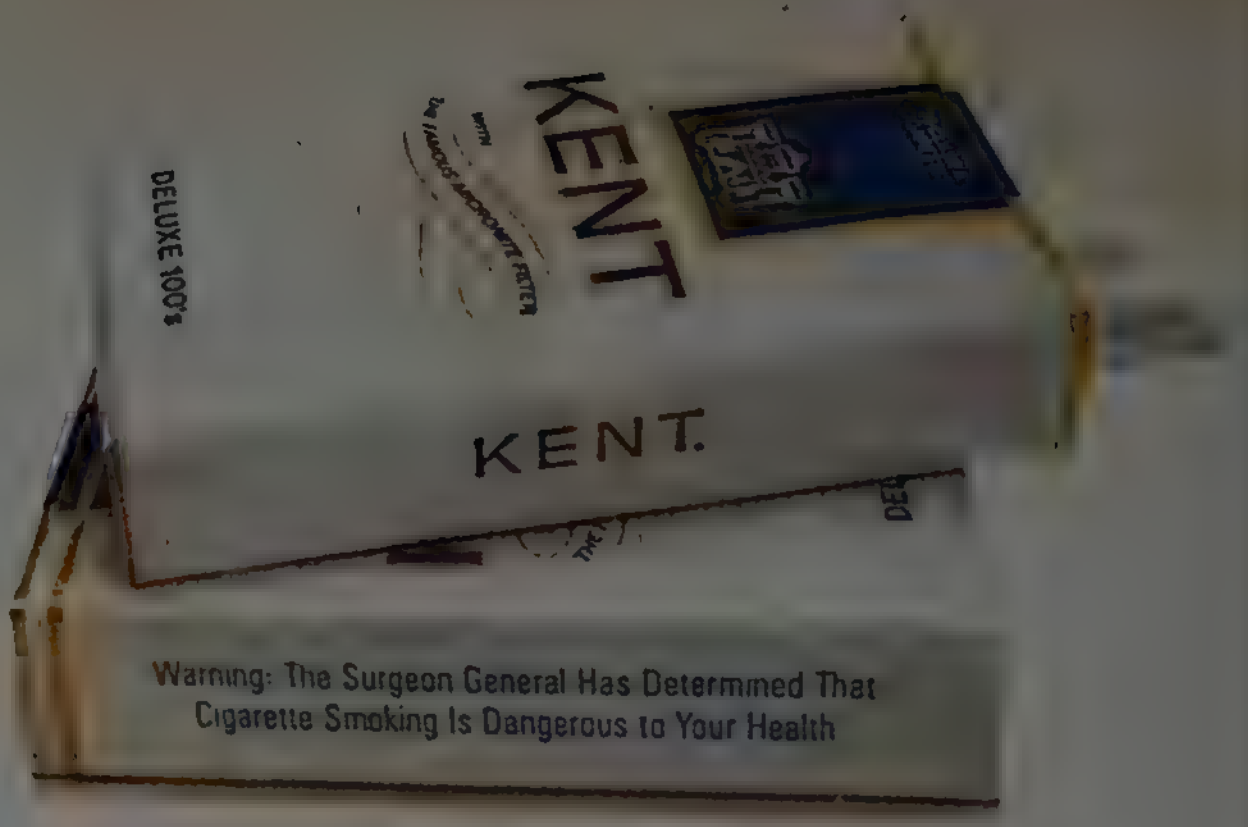
# What a good time for all the good things of a Kent.

**Mild, smooth taste.**
**King size or Deluxe 100's.**
**Exclusive Micronite® filter.**

Kings: 17 mg. "tar," 1.0 mg. nicotine;
100's: 19 mg. "tar", 1.2 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report Aug. '71.

© Lorillard 1971

What a good time for all the good things of a Kent.




# Cozy 'n Kent!

them beyond Qeeban's nervous system for the first time since joining him. Immediately it felt the attack.

*Forgive me, Qeeban,* it told him during his last moments of consciousness. *I must desert you!* Then, hastily, it began its withdrawal from the Arath's body.

It was to no avail. The viral spores had made contact with the Lothian and they followed it, entering its own tissues as they formed on Qeeban-En's shoulders.

The Lothian sent out one last telepathic message to its kind:

*Plague!* Then it too knew death.

The entire planet was linked. The plague spread with incredible swiftness. Only the island continent of Zanora was successfully closed in time. The spores moved with deadly effectiveness as they struck human, winged-men, and Lothian alike. There was only time for one quick message to go out to the Civilized Worlds for a quarantine and then Qanar was cut off from the progression of civilization among the stars.

All those who contracted the spores died. There were no exceptions. Only those few across the planet who withdrew themselves into seclusion in time survived. And they were but a handful, human and non-human alike.

Time passed. Centuries unfolded. The sun changed, growing from yellow to white, and collapsing inward upon itself to become less than half of its former diameter. Qanar grew hotter. The thin icecaps melted, raising the ocean-level by some six-feet. Some coastlines were hardly affected. Other lands were entirely submerged. New currents eroded sunken areas quickly, throwing up beaches where forests had once grown, carving channels and leaving mountaintops individual islands.

Two thousand years passed.

The white sun bombarded the atmosphere with a fiercer concentration of radiation. The spores had mu-

tated in their lush surroundings. The radiation killed many, caused others to assume once more the dormancy they had once known in space.

Somehow, life became adjusted to the new cycles, the new climate and lands. Somehow the planet began once again to grow. Once more the race of men—human and non-human—began to breed.

Some still remembered. In places pockets of knowledge remained. Others fought their way up from the barbarism of primitive ignorance. But everywhere upon the world of Qanar new life sprouted.

# Chapter 10

The two thousand years since the onslaught of the plague had not been kind to the land men knew as the Arathdom. Divided into two halves, north and south, by the equator, its jungles were burned dry and then reduced to ashes and sand, a wide band of equatorial desert that cut the land in two with a hellish no-man's land.

Perhaps—there was no way of knowing—it went better for the Arath of the south, but those few who survived in the north found themselves unable to maintain the machinery of their beautiful cities. Knowledge—in the abstract—survived in the racial memories of the Lothian. In a sense each Arath-Loth symbiosis carried a private library of all the Lothian culture—but too often the demands of existence, or the inadequacy of personal experience, made access to this library, this whole wise culture, a luxury the surviving Arath could not easily afford. Once more thrown upon their own wits to survive, denied the bounty of rich Lothian technology, the Arath must need devote much—most—of their time to hunting, to the satisfaction of their own simple hunger to remain alive.

Now the still-beautiful sky-tall pastel spires of the cities stood as a monument to the past, a memorial to a better time, when the machines worked, power was

cheap, and every Arath knew the security of a well-provided-for existence. The towers still stood, sterile and empty, too proud to fall to the creeping jungle that had swarmed over them, but unable to support Arath life.

Lorex had grown up in the shadows of the City Lonnor, had known its high towers as a young nestling, light of body and able to soar upon the winds for hours on end. Often he had landed upon the exterior balconies, provided for just this purpose, to catch his breath and rest his wings. And, as he grew older and heavier, and the rest periods became longer, he had spent that time roaming within the towers, exploring room after room, discovering half-hidden chambers, with all the quick delight of a youth.

As he had grown older, the towers and the city itself had come to fascinate him for the myriad secrets they held. Not the grandiose secrets of which the legends told —legends passed from child to child before one earned one's own Lothian—but the secrets of a city's trivia: the personal effects of its citizens now long dead. Loroloth knew the entire broad spectrum of Lothian and Arath history, among all the accumulated memories of its two "parents" in fusion. The generalized memories were passed from Lothian to Lothian of each generation, reinforced by every Lothian down the long chain of descent which shares these memories. But individual memories—those of a specific Lothian—were diffused and lost within a few "generations." Lorex could share Loroloth's accumulated knowledge and memories of his parents—whose symbiotic Lothians had paired to create his own symbiote, Loroloth—and he had access also to the memories of his grandparents through their Lothians. But his great-grandparents were rarely tapped and he neither knew nor cared for the generation before them. There were too many of them, and they had too little to teach him about the modern world.

The Arath passed on their symbiotes, products of first fusion and then fission, only when their children reached the onset of puberty. There was wisdom in this tradition:

once a young Arath had taken his Lothian he had not only a permanent mental relay with his parents, but also immediate access to all their accumulated memories up to that point. It was considered unwise to impart the knowledge of the adult world, which every Lothian carried as its gift, to a young child—it was too precipitous. It erased the innocence of childhood too soon. Some children had inherited their Lothians soon after birth, and it had warped their minds, superimposing over their natural immaturity a forced maturity in effect which allowed no growth for the child itself. Memories of these experiments remained in the racial memory of the Lothian.

*I'm too old,* Lorex thought. *I'm too easily moved by my own mating urges.*

*Cirex is awake,* Loroloth said.

Lorex leaped forward, reaching for the shrinking girl, but she ducked back under the slanting eaves and he struck the low roof with his left wing and his head, falling, dazed to his knees.

And still she screamed! Her face was distorted, and her wordless shrieks slashed at his ears.

"Quiet, girl! *Quiet!*" he shouted, but she only shrank further back from him, moving in a sidewise scuttle now for the stairway.

*Cirex is coming,* Loroloth said.

—*Too late!* Lorex replied, feeling close to despair. *Too late by half!*

At that moment a light appeared at the stairs, and an arm and a head followed it. The screams stopped, and for a moment the silence was unbroken. Then:

"Father! A monster!" the girl cried in a hoarse voice.

The light raised higher, and Lorex saw that it was Starkover. In his other hand the man brandished a dully-gleaming blade—a bayonette or short sword.

Lorex drew back, reaching for his kit by the bed.

Starkover called his daughter to him, and in the light she slinked, a scrawny creature approaching her father as a dog might who has misbehaved and expects punish-

ment, but returns to his master for protection from a greater fear.

"Your daughter is unharmed," Lorex said. "She—"

"My ears are closed to you, night-beast," Starkover said. "You shall not consume my soul as you have this young girl's."

"*Father,*" the girl cried, "No, I am not—he has not—"

"I do not know you," Starkover told her. "Go down and get you gone from this house. I shall not see you again."

"Oh, father, no . . ." she sobbed. The big man seized her hair and thrust her down the stairs, stumbling and cowering.

"Begone!" he shouted.

"You harm yourself by this," Lorex tried to say, but the human turned toward him with an expression of ferocity, brandishing his weapon.

"Soul-eater, night-beast, I shall put an end to you here and now!" Starkover cried, and lunged forward, sword-arm swinging.

Lorex was at a disadvantage here: he could not stand erect under this low roof, and his wings only encumbered him. His belt strapped on a kit in place, he flung his cloak outwards, sweeping it over his adversary's head, arm and sword. Then, quickly, he bent and yanked downwards, the thick folds of cloth pulling Starkover forward and down, tripping and spilling the man.

Spreading his wings, Lorex made a leap and pinion-thrust and was over the enraged human and behind him.

Starkover's curses, threats and imprecations were muffled by the cloak, but still filled the air, beating at Lorex's back as he threw himself down the stairs, bowling over Sten and Vart at the foot of the second flight.

He did not pause, but thrust himself past them for the first flight of stairs, descending it in a leap and two bounds.

Like the second floor, the ground floor was in semi-darkness, and at first Lorex thought himself home free. Then Hobb loomed out of the shadows, a long spear in

his hands, his whole body leaning into a thrust which, if it took Lorex, would surely spit him like the shoat they had shared that very night.

At that moment Cirex appeared in the outer doorway, his cloaked form filling it, his body a rush of forward movement.

Lorex jumped for the long table, which swayed uncertainly under his weight, and dodged the spear thrust. Then, by the dying light of the fireplace, he saw the hilt of an Arath dagger materialize in Hobb's neck and knew in that certain moment that all he had tried to build between the Arath and humans had been destroyed.

Hobb fell forward, sprawling across the long table, his body carried by its own impetus, already dead. Lorex swiveled to stare at the dead man, fascinated in his own horror.

Then Cirex was past him, his gnarled hand reaching for the dagger. While Lorex still stood frozen, Cirex pulled the dagger free with a spurt of blood that left his hand and arm red and glistening.

"Well?" Cirex said, turning, "Are you staying?"

Lorex shook his head dumbly, and then raced down the table to its far end, took the jump to the floor and ran out the gaping doorway, Cirex quick behind him. A sudden cry of lament chased at their heels.

"I came over the wall," Cirex grunted, as they ran through the village. Behind them shouts were arising, and already shutters were being thrown back from windows by sleepy but curious villagers.

When they reached the stockade wall, Cirex whipped off his own cloak and sprang with it into the air, his wings beating furiously. Lorex followed.

An adult Arath could not maintain a sustained flight, but much as a ground fowl can fly short distances over low obstacles, so also the two Arath flew over the stockade wall to alight again on the far side. Cirex had led them to a spot almost opposite the gates, on the other side of the village. He had done so for the simple reason that the Arath encampment was here, but his choice had

also the effect of frustrating the villagers who had started to give chase. They were forced to reverse their direction, and make for the gates, taking a far longer route.

Nonetheless, they represented an immediate danger.

When Lorex ran into the camp it was already in a turmoil of activity. Without a single shout exchanged, the Arath had been awakened by their Lothian symbiotes and were moving quickly to their allotted tasks. Kept informed by running communications from Loroloth and Ciroloth to their own Lothians, each Arath was aware of the need for haste.

They'd have to leave the oxen behind; there was no way they could avoid that, and Lorex was not so very sorry either. They would not stay and fight. He wanted no more blood shed, either Arath or human. Recriminations with Cirex were useless: he knew Cirex had acted exactly as he would have acted, had their roles been reversed. Seeing his captain threatened with death, Cirex had acted by reflex, throwing his dagger with a true and perfect aim. Just so: it was done and could not be undone, so recriminations would be to no advantage at all. But all the same, to have brought about the death of the son of his host—Lorex knew that it would remain upon his conscience for a long time. And that, he feared, would by no means be the end of it. Starkover was a vengeful man when aroused; he would not let this thing end so quickly.

It was no part of their mission to enflame the humans. It could only delay them if they were drawn into needless battle. He could do no more than hope that immediate flight would be enough to forestall additional hostilities—and that the slow and imperfect communications between the human settlements would also act in their favor. Yes, best to leave the oxen; Starkover would win a small victory in that which might, in time, serve to mollify him somewhat.

The Arath made quick work of their tasks, repacking their supplies and equipment to stow what was essential

in their own backpacks, abandoning the non-essentials and surplus to the villagers. They worked with inhuman speed and efficiency, rarely speaking to each other at all. Here too was an advantage: another element of surprise that might aid them in their escape.

Lorex stood a little way back from the others, watching and monitoring them through Loroloth. With a cautious eye upon the stockade and the way the villagers must come, he was taken by surprise when the bushes at his back rustled and a small figure stepped out.

It was the girl, Cilla. Shivering in the night air, arms hugging her body, she approached him hesitatingly and asked, through chattering teeth, "Take me with you?"

He stared at her in consternation. The night cloaked her thin figure with shadows, but could not restore her dignity. *A spare cloak*, he told Loroloth. *And—a spare pair of sandals, perhaps?* To the girl he said quietly, "Take you with us? Are we not monsters, as you said?" He flexed and spread his wings to their full span.

She shrank back, but nodded her head. "Yes—I mean, no—I don't know. I only know that I have been cast out and can only go with you."

"You can go to another village," Lorex said.

"No," she shook her head sadly. "They would know. I have lost my soul. I must follow you."

"Why—us?"

"Who else would take me?" she asked, simply.

*They come.* Lorex jerked up his head and saw the torches bobbing in the distance as the villagers spilled out of their gates. He gave Loroloth his command. To the girl he said only "Come, then."

The Arath began melting into the bordering forest, leaving behind their tents and oxen exactly as if the camp still slept. One Arath slipped out of the darkness next to Lorex and the girl, tossed a folded bundle to the winged man, and faded away again into the trees.

Lorex shook out the cloak, caught the linked sandals as they fell, and thrust them at the girl. "Put these on,"

he told her, and then as she bent to slip them on her feet he threw the cloak over her shoulders, reaching around her neck to clasp its collar. For a moment he wondered at himself. Was this the second time this human girl had inspired him rashly? Was she in fact his nemesis?

But he was no barbarian. He was of the Arath, an heir to the Lothian culture that spanned the stars. For some reason, that thought did not comfort him this night as it once had.

They made their new camp beyond the near ridge, in the wet forest. This was an Arath camp—pitched in the trees. Each man found himself a berth in the juncture of two or more sturdy branches and the main trunk of a tree, and, guided by primeval Arath instincts, settled himself so that nothing might topple him in his sleep.

All of which was very well—motivated by the necessity of the loss of their tents, and serving the good purpose of escape from human detection as a campsite—but what to do with the human girl?

She stood on the ground, sodden and forlorn, her cloak draped damply around her slight and wingless figure, and again Lorex was reminded of a shorn butterfly. What was he to do with her? She could not fly into the boughs of the trees, nor was it likely that she could maintain a perch in them. The ground was wet, the underbrush dripping. The air was thick with a heavy fog that muffled sounds and dimmed all light.

"Where am I to put you, girl?" he asked her, not unkindly.

She started from some inner reverie and turned her pale face toward him. "Wherever you wish," she said simply.

He made an impatient sound with his nostrils, fatigue cutting his temper short. "I wish you back in your father's house!" he said. "But that won't put you there, and I am lost for a notion of what to do with you. Bestir yourself, girl! It is equally obvious that you can neither

sleep upon this wet ground nor among us in the trees. Have you no ideas of your own?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I cannot. You have taken my soul."

Lorex uttered a short angry word. "I have not taken your soul," he said. "No one has taken your soul. You are still in possession of your own soul."

"That cannot be," she said. "Else my father would not have turned me out from his house."

Lorex gestured impatiently, a movement lost in the darkness. "You coped well enough," he pointed out, "in finding us and attaching yourself to us. Therefore, perhaps you will find a solution to your present problem." And so saying, he whipped his wings against the air, their gusts buffeting against the girl, and rose up into a close-by tree. "Do as you will," he called down to her, feeling disgust at his own helplessness to deal with the situation. An unasked-for responsibility, and one for which he was totally unprepared.

He made a nest for himself of his cloak and settled down to endure the rest of a long, damp and unpleasant night. His last waking throught was ironic: of the bed in Starkover's house from which he had fled so precipitously, and of how little he had appreciated it at the time.

Morning was gray and damp. Peering up through the overhanging branches of his tree, Lorex saw low clouds scudding quickly overhead. He stretched, cold and weary of this inhospitable place. As he did so, he communicated with Loroloth, and through the Lothian with his men. It was only when he had completed his duties as a First Captain that he looked down.

The human girl, Cilla, was a sodden bundle at the foot of his tree.

Sudden compassion struck him as he gazed down at her. What had he been thinking, last night, in abandoning her so? *Punishment?* Loroloth suggested, and he recognized the truth in that.

The bundle stirred, and then unfolded a little. A woebegone face, pinched with anxiety, streaked with dirt and tears, raised itself to return his stare.

At that moment Lorex felt both wise and old.

# PART THREE

## Chapter 11

Death by dehydration comes slowly and not at all easily. The blood thickens, circulation slows, and the brain is slowly starved of oxygen. Urination is painful, and the urine is dark and rank, overfreighted with uric acid and the toxins of the body. Various systems within the body begin to break down. The kidney stops its normal functions, body fat is broken down for the energy and water contained in it. The skin becomes dry, thick, scaly and unlubricated. The lips crack and ooze a blackening blood. So also the nasal passages, their mucus protection gone.

Long before the process is completed, the victim loses consciousness, first to a series of hallucinations and waking dreams. And then to a sleep which he will not awaken as his metabolism slows to the point of death.

Makstarn had not been told these things, but he was coming to know them, and to know also the terrible finality of his own death. The heat was an Enemy, riding side by side with Death upon terrible foul-smelling lemacs.

Already his thoughts were jumbled, chaotic. He had strange memories—*of his father?*—and of a task he had been set to do. Had he done it? He rubbed his hand against his head, and could not tell.

The play of sunlight on something bright brought to

his mind for a moment a vision: his Enemies, towering over him astride their lemacs, laughing at him, one of them holding a sword poised for descent.

Then his vision cleared and he saw it was his own knife, lying on the barren rock. His head was hanging between his knees and for a moment dizziness swept him and he all but lost his balance. Where was up? He raised his head and stared for a moment directly into the white sun. Then he slumped once again, the effort too great—the pain unnoticed.

At last he fell into a sprawl upon the rough surface of the rock, covering his knife with his own body, his outflung hand only a fingertip short of the wolf's body.

Somewhere inside of him the spark flickered, then brightened for a moment, and he knew a moment of rationality: *I was to kill the wolf.*

And he had not. He had dropped the knife and had no will to pick it up again. Had the heat sapped his will from him—or was it simply that he could not commit an act of murder, the killing of the wolf?

In that fleeting moment of rationality he knew that he had faced a test—and failed. His own survival had depended upon the wolf's death—and his consumption of the wolf's remaining flesh and fluids. In failing to kill the wolf he had prolonged its life by only a matter of hours, at best . . . and he had committed suicide for himself.

Was it only sentiment? He did not know. Perhaps he had already waited too long. Perhaps he had already become too weak to perform the task. Perhaps—perhaps he had been unwilling to admit to himself the very decision that had faced him until it was already out of his hands. He did not know . . . and now it could hardly matter anyway. He had not betrayed his friend. He knew that much, and knew also, in a sudden burst of insight that brought him peace, that if he had failed one test, he had passed another.

The sun topped its high arc and began to fall into the west. As it did so, shadows began to form and then crawl

outwards in lengthening fingers across the desert face. The mountains beckoned, and the sun at last dipped, glowing, behind them, leaving the land abandoned to the encroachment of night.

Somewhere on the western edge of the desert, all but cradled by the foot of the mountains, two figures lay sprawled, unmoving, upon the hot stone floor. When the advance of twilight reached them, a small insect, tiny as a mote and wrapped in a hard waxy black shell, moved cautiously from a hairline crack in a slab of rock. Its antennae testing the vagaries of the nearly motionless air, it advanced slowly from its hiding place and began questing its way across the miniature ridges and valleys of the face of the slab.

When it came to the first figure, it began climbing the body as it would an unforeseen obstacle. Relentlessly guided by its hormonal induction guidance system, the insect maintained a single direction, wavering from its course only momentarily and always resuming it.

The insect climbed Makstarn's left foot, negotiated his ankle, and moved quickly along his leg to his hip as if traversing a bridge. The journey over Makstarn's chest was equally fast, and that brought the insect to his collar bone, jutting skeletally, his neck, and his nose. The nose stopped the insect for a moment. Its course led it directly into Makstarn's right nostril, but something warned it this would be a dead end. It darted hesitantly in and then back again, executing a figure-eight pattern twice until it decided to move to the left of the nose, climb its bridge, Makstarn's dry forehead, wend its way slowly through a jungle of hair, and then resume its way along the slab of rock.

During the time the insect had been negotiating its passage over Makstarn, night had fallen.

During the night the desert shed some of its residual heat into the air, convection currents kicking up sudden startled gusts of wind that rose, danced aimlessly, and then fell silent.

The Red Moon rose, and in its wan cherry light one of the two figures moved a little. The human's face turned to meet the rock and his tongue made feeble licking motions against the rough surface. Then, still slack-mouthed, the figure was silent again.

Again the winds came to dart and play, kicking up twists of dust, but these were winds that strengthened instead of dying, winds that blew from out of the west and tasted of cooler, higher climes.

Then the warm glow of the Red Moon was shed upon a new phenomenon—although not one unknown to the desert in this season: A great crest of gray-darkness appeared at the eastern peak of the western wall of mountains, lapped over its ridges and spilled down its sides for the desert floor.

The winds increased, building now to gale-like intensity, scouring sand and dust over the motionless figures of the human and the wolf, but carrying the scent of something far more precious: water.

With the painful slowness which distance imparts to swift-moving events, the gray-darkness fell like a great ocean roller down the mountain side, throwing before it an icy chill that drove the winds that fled it ever faster. Soundlessly, like a great mountainous wave submerging the mountains themselves, it advanced along the entire western horizon: a scourge, washing and pushing everything in its path before it.

This, then, was the birth of a desert storm.

Moving with a velocity far greater than the speed of the fastest running beast, the storm clouds raced down the mountain sides for the desert floor. Already far in advance was the first wave of the flash flood—the runoff of waters from the barren faces of the mountains, spilling down gullies, quickly overflowing, merging, throwing the rubble of a season's heat and wind erosion before it, boulders tumbling before the weight of tons of water.

When the water struck the desert floor much of its impetus was absorbed by the thirsty desert itself. But it

was fortunate indeed for Makstarn and the wolf that they had been able to journey no further and had fallen at last at a high place on the desert shelf, a sort of weathered foothill around which the waters parted, flowing through lower areas to the north and the south. That the road had brought them hence was no coincidence, for the builders of the road had already begun seeking the more elevated approaches to the western mountain range and had quite deliberately routed the road across this shelf.

Thus, the first wave of silt-filled waters passed the two by, unknowing and uncaring. And the sudden chill that followed passed over them also without effort.

But then the glow of the Red Moon was snuffed out, and from the west came the sounds of many riders pounding, and some deep uneasiness stirred the wolf, although it remained unconscious yet.

The storm announced its presence without further warning. For a moment the air was filled with a brilliant light, so bright and vivid that the wasted figure of the human moaned and turned his head away, eyes still clamped tight shut. The wolf's fur rose all over its body, charged and snapping with sparks. Then the light was gone and a thunderous peel of sound followed it, like a great door slammed shut behind it. The thunderclap rocked and echoed across the desert, amplified by its reverberation from the mountainside. And then, as if rent by the great knife of the lightning, the skies were torn open and the rain fell.

This was no ordinary storm—the storms that swept the desert never were. Nor was the rain that fell an ordinary rain in any sense. A bucket set for only a moment in such a rain, would be filled in that moment. Water fell in a solid mass, ceaselessly pounding, battering flat everything between it and the ground.

Even in sandy areas of the desert, such a deluge could not be absorbed quickly enough by the desert floor. Here among shelves of naked rock, the rain formed a blanket

over every horizontal surface, splashing down ceaselessly, building up faster than it could run off. Quite suddenly the world was mantled with water.

The water flowed in torrents over Makstarn's body, eddying around and under him. The level of the water on the shelf on which he was lying half submerged his down-turned face—and somehow, somewhere deep inside of him, *he knew.*

He moved. It was only a fractional movement: he turned his head a little so that his nose was free of the water, and his mouth opened, his tongue lolling out. Water, ever-freshened, swirled around his mouth, bringing a balm to his split lips and shriveled tongue.

For many long moments he did not move, but simply lay in the moving water, soaking it in. Then, motivated by some growing spark of consciousness, he turned his face downward again, submerging his nose, and began swallowing convulsively, taking great gulps of the water. He paused only to raise his nose from the water, draw a shuddering breath, and then return again to drink some more.

During this time he was unaware of the pummelling of the rain against his body, unaware even of the difficulty in drawing a breath in air so thick with water. He lived. He was parched and there was water. It was enough to exist and to drink. He asked no more, cared for nothing else.

After a time, a sudden spasm struck him, doubling him up into a fetal position, forcing an eruption of all the water he had swallowed, and a great racking groan. The rain washed it all away, quickly and efficiently, and he subsided into the same pattern as before—gulping in the water, pausing only for necessary breaths of air.

This time he did not lose it. And soon, still afloat in the artificial sea of the rushing rain, he fell asleep once more.

When the new day dawned, it did so belatedly, pale light filtering down through a heavy overcast of clouds, wisps of fog rising from the desert.

Makstarn sat up and looked around and did not know where he was.

He seemed to be on a low island in an inland sea. The wind-stirred waters extended as far as his eye could see to the east, blurring into the gray sky without perceptible horizon. To the west, a narrower body of water, and the lower wall of the mountains, their upper reaches obscured by fog and clouds. Not far away was the black stripe of the road: submerged where it descended into the east, climbing a narrow land-bridge towards the mountains to the west.

The air was thick with humidity and although the day was cool—for the desert—it was nonetheless stifling.

Makstarn shifted his body and was aware, from among the many aches and pains that assaulted him, of a seared area on his lower chest.

His eyes fell to the rock on which he'd lain, and he saw there the softly gleaming knife he'd dropped the day before. He raised his hand hesitantly and touched his chest, tracing out the pattern of the seared area. It was long and narrow, a diagonal that began just below his left breast and ended a little to the right and below his navel. The mark of his knife.

Movement brought him fresh pains. His back felt dried and stiff, like hardened leather, and raising an arm brought an involuntary cry to his lips. He looked at himself with a wonder and amazement and marvelled that life remained in his tortured, beaten body.

Then he looked for the wolf.

The rock shelf was empty. The wolf was gone. He wondered how that might be. Had the wolf been taken by unseen scavengers? But, if that was the case, why had he been left? His head felt dull and empty; he had a sense of knowledge forgotten, of memories lost. He felt stupid. And then he heard the nearby whine of the wolf.

He turned his head and winced at fresh pain. The back of his neck felt as if he had torn his skin open.

The wolf was slowly climbing up the layered shelves

of rock to the place where he waited. He saw the wolf's forelegs and paws were wet, its fur matted, and he understood. The wolf had gone down to the water to drink.

The wolf paused when it reached the final ledge and the two stared at one another for a long silent moment.

They lived. A miracle had befallen them, and they still lived. But Makstarn beheld in the wolf a sad, mangy animal, thin almost to emaciation, eyes still dulled, tongue drooling, ribs sharply slatted like an empty cage. And the wolf saw before it a human very little better off. Makstarn's hair was a heavy tangle, his face darkly bronzed, his eyes sunken under jutting brows and surrounded by weathered creases. His cheekbones were crudely chiseled and his mouth a dark slash in his face. His limbs were little but bones entwined with ropes of muscles. His chest was sunken, ribs starkly outlined, belly deeply recessed. And across his chest was burned the brand of a knife.

Two survivors. They stared at each other and the wolf's tail twitched in a side-to-side motion that might, in healthier times, have been a wag.

Makstarn felt his universe wrench, suddenly, into a newly ordered pattern, and he laughed, a harsh barking laugh that seemed much too loud to his own ears.

This, then, was the cosmic joke of the gods: to dangle death before them until they despaired no longer, but accepted it gladly—and then to jerk it back again and consign them to the torture of continued life! He laughed until his belly ached and he could laugh no more.

The storm had brought a miracle to the desert—a miracle beyond that of life to two parched travellers. The storm brought the miracle of life to the desert itself—as each such storm would do on those rare occasions that they came.

Dumping tons of water upon a land where water was, at best, an annual occurrence, the storm left in its wake great inland seas and lakes, tumbling rivers and mean-

dering streams—a vast reservoir of water for the use of all the dormant life that waited in the desert sands. It would not last. Within a day or two, all but the largest bodies of water, still trapped in lowland basins, would be gone from the surface of the desert. Much would remain, of course, beneath the surface, where knowing plants and burrowing animals might find and tap it. Much more would, under the intense heat of the white sun, evaporate into the heavens to be carried away to other parts of the world. But while the abundance of water remained, it would lavishly be consumed by the desert flora which had awaited its coming so patiently, and for so long.

Even here, in that part of the desert where there was little but rock and rough rubble, seeds had waited in the crevices in which the winds had blown them, seeds which needed only the touch of water to bring them to quick germination, sprouting, and growth.

Down along the water's edge, thick fleshy stalks were already growing upwards in the steamy air in amazing profusion. Makstarn thrust them aside impatiently in order that he might fill his water skin and bathe himself. Astonishingly, they were not rooted, but floated freely in the water, righting themselves from their unexpected dunking, and never pausing in their almost visible growth.

These plants had been bred by thousands of years of knowing evolution: they coped with an existence almost unbelievable in its extremes. They had at best only a few days in which to grow to maturity, flower, pollinate, seed, and die. Their seeds must, if necessary, survive for many years in a waterless climate without losing potency. And when water came again, they must be ready to react quickly to re-enact the entire brief cycle.

Makstarn had heard of his father's stories about these amazing plants; he was still unprepared for the sight of them.

He was even more startled, however, at the appearance of a tiny swimming creature in the water near him: a fish! He stared at it too benumbed by surprise to react.

It was only as long as the tip of his finger, and it quickly disappeared in the cloudy water.

He climbed onto the rock shelf that had become the water's bank, and tried to think. Fish did not come from seeds, but they did come from eggs. He knew that; he'd fished on many a lazy summer day along the river where his people had camped. Was it possible for a fish's eggs to survive the desert dryness like a plant seed? He had never heard of such a thing, but here, surely, was proof that it must be so.

And if one fish survived, perhaps many survived . . .

# Chapter 12

He needed a net. He had few materials, but without a net it would be impossible to catch many of the tiny fingerlings. He plucked at one of the floating plants, and pulled it apart with his fingers, examining it.

No good. Its stalk was fleshy, bruised easily, and did not separate into usable fibers. He picked up a small stone, pounded on the remaining stalk, and quickly beat it into a slimy jelly. He threw the stone out into the water, feeling disgusted. The stone hit with a plop and left and expanding set of ripples to mark its passage.

He tugged at his hair, pulling a strand from its unkempt mass. From somewhere on the top of his head the strand passed down over his face and below his mouth. Perhaps it was long enough.

He hacked handfuls of long hair from his head and with stiff fingers that soon grew sore he plaited them into longer strands which he wove into a fine-meshed net. Cut leather thongs, stiff from the soaking and drying they'd received, made a looped rim for the net. It wasn't large—only two hands-breadths across and equally deep—but it might do.

The task had taken all of the morning and much of the afternoon. He had bloated his belly with water, but he still felt the sharp pangs of hunger—all the stronger for the immediacy of the fish.

When he went back down to the water's edge, he found the level had dropped. The island dropped off in a series of wide shelves on this side, and the water had fallen two shelves below its morning level.

Left behind were the rapidly putrifying carcasses of stranded plants, their stench a heavy musk in the air. Annoyed, he kicked a mass of the slimy plants aside. Immediately a cloud of tiny midges rose into the air, hunted back and forth for a moment, and disbursed, settling back among the remains of the dead plants.

The wolf had followed him down to the water and had cocked an ear at the sudden flight of the insects, but now settled down upon a bare patch of rock to watch. Makstarn waded out into the water, feeling cautiously with his feet for the next dropoff of shelves.

Waist-deep in the cloudy water, he lowered the net, holding it just under the water's surface. Then, turning slowly about, he trolled the net at arm's length in a wide circle. Half afraid to discover what its contents might be, he pulled it free of the water, and peered into it.

Five fingerling fish, white on their undersides, dark silver on their backs flipped frantically among the confining folds of the net. But equally remarkable, he had caught more: a score of tiny translucent creatures with many legs on each side and insubstantial shells. They looked like miniature replicas of the shellfish he had dug from the river mudbanks in his childhood.

Holding his catch aloft, he made his way quickly out of the water, and stooped to sit next to the wolf.

Five tiny fish—single bites, each. There were no materials at hand for a fire, and he was impatient at the thought anyway. Eagerly he fumbled for one of the still lively fish, caught it between clumsy fingers, and by the glow of the afternoon sun through the cloud cover, he ate his first meal in many days.

He ate the first catch of fish himself, dumping the tiny shellfish upon the surface of the rock under the wolf's nose. The wolf caught them all up with one smooth swipe of its tongue, seemed to pause for only a single

swallow, and then looked up at him with new eagerness in its still-dull eyes.

The next catch—a little larger than the first—he dumped out for the wolf, and this established the pattern they followed until the light grew too dim to continue. A catch for himself, a catch for the wolf, and then again another for himself and another for the wolf. After the first catch he too ate the shellfish—they seemed to dissolve after a few bites to crush their fragile shells, and all but melted in his mouth, with the flavor of fresh sweet water.

At last he laid himself down to rest beside the wolf, full of belly and feeling more soundly content than he had ever known himself before. He had this day drunk deeply and eaten his fill. He had this day found life again. What more could anyone ask?

They stayed there for three days, regaining their lost health. During those three days, Makstarn marvelled endlessly at the continual progression of growth in the plants and fish, the increasing swarms of insects, including some whose delicate wings were as large as his hands, and all the myriad ways in which life coped and thrived with this brief bounty of abundant water.

The first plants—the rootless ones—grew quickly and many matured and filled the air with the dust of their spores before dying. But many more found themselves left behind on dry land—or stone—by the steadily receding waters, there to quickly dehydrate and die. Where the rock shelved sharply, these first plants left a dry scab that could be bathered and burned. Where the land sloped more gradually, they formed a bed from which sprang a new generation of plants, these with primitive root systems that travelled back to the waterline. Some of these plants died too, when the water receded more quickly than their roots could follow, and they laid down yet another layer of quickly decaying organic matter for yet newer plants. These latecomers were smaller, thinner, less prodigal with water: evolved grasses which

were the last to die and might survive for weeks on the residual water of their dead hosts. When at last the desert was dry again, the winds would stir and tear free this fragile sod, crumbling and dusting it over a vast area. But each time this slowly eked-out process occurred, the tiny roots of these fleeting moments of plantlife would etch their way a little further into the raw and naked rock of the desert's western floor. And someday here too the hardier desert plants might come to grow year round as they did in the east.

Makstarn lacked the knowledge of this greater battle of life for the desert, but he could appreciate its impact upon his own survival. The storm had been providential, bringing with it not only water, but the nourishment of food.

The fish came in ever-increasing numbers: on each day he found his net fuller from every cast. The cloudy waters were rich in minerals which fed single-celled life that multiplied furiously. Upon this the fish fed ravenously, living out their short lifespan in a handful of days, never growing larger than minnows, but quickly maturing, mating and spawning, so that their eggs might collect in the final muddy pools and become locked into the baked clay bottoms to remain until water again soaked deep into the desert floor and brought liberation and growth. In this, the fish and other water-life paralleled the life-cycles of the plants.

The days were steamy and primal, the nights overcast and foggy. The cloud cover filtered the white sun's hot rays, but held in the day's heat for the duration of each night. Occasionally a cloud would burst into a brief local shower, and once rain fell for a few moments upon Makstarn and the wolf while they slept. It did not awaken them.

They slept a great deal, often more than half a day, spending their waking hours eating and resting. Makstarn fished great quantities of fish and they made gluttons of themselves. On other occasions he lazed about in the water, floating on his back.

The water steadily receded, and although much of the sediment settled out, it grew less and less fresh to the taste, the distillation and evaporation leaving behind a growing amount of salts.

On the second day, Makstarn collected the makings of a fire, rigged a crude rack over it, and began drying the surplus fish. They shrivelled into insubstantial chips, threatening to blow away in the first real gust of wind, but he ground them into a coarse meal and stowed it in his pack.

By the middle of the third day, the water had disappeared entirely to the west, and had receded into scattered pools to the east. Makstarn found many of these pools swarming with concentrations of fish, and he had only to dip his net to fill it. That afternoon, the cloud cover broke, revealing great patches of startling blue sky. Thick beams of golden sunshine painted the desert before dusk, and that night by the first light of the Red Moon, they finally moved on.

The road climbed surely into the eastern face of the great mountain range, finding always the easy grade. In places it seemed a god had smote the mountainside to slash a passage. In other places the nearby side of a mountain had collapsed, falling down and across the road, leaving Makstarn and the wolf to cautiously pick their way over the tumbled rock and rubble, sometimes starting new slides as they went.

Up and always up, the road climbed, and as it did the air grew noticeably cooler, the nights almost chilly and the days less hot, especially in the giant shadows through which the road often wended. Finding its way through unsuspected folds and passes, the road quickly left the desert behind and lost to view. Here the horizon was immediate, no further away than the next low crest or sharp turn and always bounded by the tall walls of the towering mountains. To look back was to see no further, and although they made their climb by easy stages,

pausing often to let their muscles regain condition, they rarely looked back toward the unseen desert hell.

It took them many days to climb the mountain road, and they retained their desert-conditioned schedule, hiking by night and sleeping by day. Their reasons, however, were reversed: while the desert was too hot to traverse under the white hot sun, the mountain nights were becoming too cold for comfortable sleep, clad as they were—Makstarn in tatters, the wolf in shaggy fur from which whole patches had been shed, the new growth still only down. So they walked by night, the exertion warming them, and slept by day.

Here in the mountains they found sparse brush and some scant game, which the wolf took pleasure in hunting, but they lived upon the fish meal, moistened with the water of an occasional mountain stream caught in Makstarn's water-skin, made into cakes, and cooked over a fire that helped dispell the chill of dawn.

Then, at last, after many days, they crested the barrier range and descended into a new world.

They were not yet hardly out of the mountains, but here in this higher elevation, watched over by taller sentinal peaks white with age, they found themselves in a land carved with rough canyons and sudden hills and thickly forested. For Makstarn the sight, one early dawn, was one he would never forget: lush dark greens that seemed to spread out below him to carpet the world. Colors so beautiful that he found tears filling his eyes and wondered that he could have forgotten so completely the sight of fertile land.

Game was easy here, and never far from the road. The wolf kept its ears cocked, casting its head this way and that, testing the air rich with scents. Birds sang in the trees, and small animals skittered away into the dense underbrush at the sound of their approach. Others, rodent-like, perched on high branches and berated them angrily for passing by.

The road was in its worst repair here, often blocked by the mighty trunks of great fallen trees, themselves festooned with vines and sometimes new trees growing like parasites from the sides of their dead elders. In other places the road was caved in or washed over, and sometimes so puzzlingly disappeared that it seemed it must never have existed here.

And the climate was in vivid contrast to the desert beyond. Clouds often scudded low overhead, caught and rebounding against the western faces of the easternmost ridges. It rained not unfrequently, sometimes in brief showers and sometimes in slow drizzles that lasted more than a day. Rain or shine, it was cool at these elevations, the air clear, thin and brisk, tangy with the scent of the forest. For Makstarn and no less for the wolf, this was a heaven to which they had ascended from hell.

On their first day in this land, acting together, the wolf hazing and Makstarn making the kill, they brought down a large and handsomely horned beast that weighed several times Makstarn's weight.

The wolf had scented it, had turned and run into the dark glades of the forest in silent bounds. Makstarn had long learned to wait out such forays and wait he did, resting on a fallen tree at the road's edge.

Then he heard a series of crashes, the sounds of a large animal blundering through the underbrush and, suddenly apprehensive, he drew out his knife and fingered it.

The sounds grew louder and nearer, and then he heard the sudden sharp, imperative bark of the wolf. He had never heard the wolf bark while hunting before and now he felt alarm. Had the animal engaged a beast too fierce for it? Or—?

With a great leap, the wolf's prey came soaring out of the forest, and Makstarn realized at once the wolf's intent. Tall as a man, large enough indeed for a man to mount and ride astride, and sporting two long curved horns over its forehead, dark brown in color and hoofed,

this animal was fine prey indeed, but easily capable of holding its own with horns and hooves against any lone wolf.

Makstarn did not hesitate, but threw himself toward the beast, flinging an arm around its horns as it shied to one side, falling over its shoulders and bringing his knife into play with his other hand, reaching around the beast's neck to slash at its throat.

The creature had started to rear, striking awkwardly at its enemy with its forehooves, catching Makstarn with one blow that scored his left thigh. Then, as its life's blood pumped in gouts from its throat, it stumbled and fell and Makstarn threw himself backwards, falling in a heap to avoid the animal's last kicks.

The wolf came up to him and sat down on its haunches, panting. In its eyes he seemed to see a certain gleam of smuugness. Yes, they made a working team.

He skinned the animal, making a crude cloak that was a good wrap against the cold night air. They made camp and spent two days there, gorging themselves on the fresh meat which the wolf ate raw, but Makstarn roasted the first day and stewed the second with wild herbs and vegetables and tubers he had found that day, and all the while drying surplus meat to take with them.

Here in this forest primeval Makstarn abandoned the nocturnal living habits he had assumed for so long. The days were too rich in sights and sounds and discoveries to waste on sleeping. The nights, bundled in the new skin before the embers of their cooking fire, too easy to pass first in open-eyed repose and then in sleep.

That first night he lay upon his back and stared up at the stars, at once so bright and so far away, and asked himself why he was here and what he intended to do with himself now.

At the beginning it had seemed obvious and easy. Well, if not easy, at least simple—forthright. The wolf had come to him from out of the desert. His father had

come out of the same desert, with another wolf for a companion, years earlier. Both wolves wore collars.

Therefore, he had only to follow this wolf back into the desert and he might solve the riddle of his father's origins. He might, indeed, discover his father!

How easy it had seemed then, a boy at a campfire, dispirited and lonely and in search of adventure. He knew almost nothing of the desert—only his father's stories, handed down to him with who could tell how much accuracy by his mother—and it had seemed a place of mystery and filled with the romance of the unknown.

Now he knew the desert. He had trekked its width and crossed the better part of a continent in so doing. It was a hard land, cruel in its treatment of hapless strangers, but as far as he could tell, it held no hidden mysteries. True, he had followed the road and ventured only a little ways to the north or south of it, but it seemed clear to him that there could be no secret habitation within the boundaries of the desert. And equally clear that while the wolf had learned to survive at least to an extent in the desert, it was not that animal's home.

Lying there under the tapestry of the stars, he remembered then his vision, and of his meeting with his father. It had seemed to him, he recalled, that the wolf itself had risen to assume the shape of a man—had *become* his father. What had that meant?

Had it been only a wandering hallucination brought to him by the heat and his own parched state? Or had it contained within it deeper meanings? He did not know, and knew no way he might find out.

But doubt had entered his mind with the memory. Doubt about the purpose of his quest, the very meaning of the goal he sought. Did he seek his father? Or only his father's origins? Was he indeed seeking out his father's *people*, in hopes of finding a society into which he might fit a little better? And how likely was that for a half-breed? What guarantee had he that his father's people

would accept him more willingly than had his mother's? And what of the wolf? What of this strange beast which had sought him out, formed a lasting partnership with him and indeed seen him through no less than two brushes with death? He had spared the wolf that day in the desert when the vision that was his father had counciled him to kill it. Had that been bravery or foolishness —or simply weakness? By rights his inaction should have consigned him to a speedy death. Only a seasonal miracle had delivered him. A cloud seemed to pass over his eyes then, and a chill settled deeply within him. Stirring, he raised himself on one elbow and fed more fuel to the dying fire.

What now? It came back to that: *what now?*

# Chapter 13

For an old man, Ly was pretty spry.

He chuckled to himself at the simple joke, just as he always did each day upon rising, walking down to the creek, and fetching a pail of water up to the house. He considered it a "house," but by most standards it was a rude hut, single-roomed, dirt-floored, and without windows. It smelled of many years habitation—by man and by wolf. And each day old Ly would rise from his woven bed, mumble complaints to himself about the coldness of the morning for this time of season, throw on his well-soiled leathers, and make the short trip down the hill for water.

He'd managed it pretty well, all these years. That was the thing to hold onto, in your mind: set yourself a simple task and perform it daily, without fail, regardless of the weather or the temperature—not that it ever got really warm enough any more—and there was your measure. As long as you always could perform that task—as long as you could fill a pail with water, leaning over stiffly on the bank of the creek, making half-heard groans to yourself upon straightening—you knew you were still all right. Yuh, pretty spry, old man Ly. . . .

The wolves had been up for hours, of course. Rose before dawn, always when hunting was best. Woke him up this day, Mama Roo did, cracking bones—her little ones

yapping and crowding around waiting for their turn, nipping at each other and occasionally her.

Didn't bother him. Wolves didn't. He could step, half blind still with sleep, right into the middle of them—just put his foot down bare amongst them—and they'd tumble all around him, the pups, but they never bit. Even their mother they'd nip, occasionally, usually teasing. But not his skinny old shanks. Never had to teach them; *they knew.*

Good thing too.

Rox came trotting out of the brush to follow him back up the hill, close by his heels, mouth hanging open, tongue out. Getting old, Rox. Stayed close around all day long—not like Rima, Pall and Dux. Sometimes wouldn't see them for days, although they always came back, barking with eagerness to see him again.

Understanding people, wolves. Better for sure'n humankind.

While Mama Roo's pups attacked Rox with playful cunning and vigor, old Ly got his fire going and made himself a breakfast, wondering all the while what it was he'd been intending for today.

A fall chill in the air—he flapped his arms energetically—would it be about time?

Suddenly Mama Roo was at the hut's door, body stiff, ears erect, muzzle pointing, looking as if she was straining at an invisible leash. A pup ran after her, yipping, and she kicked it, in a backward somersault, back into the darkness of the hut. A small ball of surprised fur.

Rox looked inquiring at Mama Roo and at Ly, his thumping tail stilled in sudden anticipation.

*What was it?* Had they a scent? An intruder? But their behavior was not ordinary, not typical of their reactions to intruders—animal or human.

Ly had a sense, a sensitivity. He'd lived with wolves for many years now—the whole of his life—and with these wolves for all their lives. Rox was getting old—was it fifteen years?—and he'd played with him as a pup. Some left, some stayed—they all knew Ly's hut as home,

if home they needed—and Rox had done his squiring about as a yearling, but mostly he'd stayed. Faithful old beast—.

Ly peered through the trees, down and across the slope, in the direction the wolves were so intently looking. Brown trunks, scaled with moss . . . dark green foliage, sprays of needles . . . the more distant trees were hazy in his vision. It smelled the same, but Ly suspicioned the air was no longer quite so clean. That, or his eyes were going. But he didn't like to consider that.

Movement. He caught at the flicker of movement and tried to focus his eyes upon it. Rox rubbed his shoulder against his leg and through his leg Ly felt the deep rumbling in Rox's chest. Mama Roo remained frozen, her pups quelled into silence behind her.

What was it? Who—what—was coming? The wolf's reactions were not normal. Friend—or enemy? Ly felt himself shiver in the morning chill and wished he understood what was happening.

There: he could see them now. A man and a wolf, climbing the slope together. *A man and a wolf—together!* How was that?

They came closer, crossing through the sunshine in the clearing where lightning had struck last year and burned away a tall stand of trees, and he could make out the man at least a little better. Short, heavily built, but all muscle and bone—looked like he'd not had a decent meal in a good time of it. Dark skin, dark features—almost burnt, he looked—and clothed in tatters, cloaked with deerskin. How strange, how purely strange!

Rox had stopped growling and seemed intent in his interest in the stranger's wolf, raising his nose and sniffing heavily. Then quite unexpectedly, he broke from Ly's side and ran barking out across the near slope, halting in sudden hesitation only a pace before the other animal and ignoring its companion.

They stopped—both man and wolf. The man did nothing. The two wolves began circling each other, warily, but closing until each had sniffed the other's hindquar-

ters. Then, quite dramatically, old Rox sat back on his haunches and let out a single bark. It was the tone of that bark which startled Ly: a tone he'd rarely heard any of the wolves use—a bark of sudden recognition, friendship, welcoming, joy. Sometimes when one of the wolves—Dux, three years ago—came back after a long time away, he might be so greeted. Was this wolf, then, one of *his*?

He moved cautiously from out of the hut and across the slope. The dark man had not moved; he stood as if carved out of patience. Ly's eyes rested upon him for a moment and then moved back to the two wolves, now nuzzling, each other with obvious friendship. The neck—yes!—a collar, one of his collars! He stared uncertainly at the wolf, speculating, prodding his reluctant memory. Gray—almost silver—a particular friendship for Rox. . . .

"Luuk," he said.

The wolf looked up at him, jaw dropping, tongue lolling, panting happily. Then, as if it too found old memories stirring, it rose, approached him, sniffed at his outstretched hand, and began to wag its tail vigorously. Ly hunkered down before the wolf and began mumbling words to it.

"Luuk, my boy, my good old boy," he said softly. "Gone so long, and finally come home. . . ."

Luuk—Rox's son, out of some wild bitch, proudly scampering back with Rox, half-grown, after Rox's last excursion away from home. How long ago? Five years? Or was it seven?

*"Luuk—"*

Ly's head swung around and he lost his balance, almost toppling onto his side. The stranger's voice was deep but croaking, as if little used. He pulled himself to his feet, staring at the man, and again he shivered in the morning's sunlit chill.

Deepset eyes, shadowed and impenetrable, watched him. He had the sensation that he confronted not a man,

but a wolf in human form—wild, implacably untamable, dangerous.

"You called him 'Luuk'! He was yours?"

Ly nodded, feeling the stiffness of the season in his neck.

"Aye, he was one of mine. Rox's son." He gestured at the other wolf. "His last."

"You knew my father, then."

Ly felt sudden bewilderment. "You—your father?" He shook his head. "No. How should I know your father?"

He raised his eyes again to the stranger's face, so dark and cold and empty of emotion.

"Years ago," the stranger said. "He had a wolf. One of yours, perhaps. It had a collar like this one's." He pointed at Luuk.

"Yes," Ly nodded. "That is my collar. I know of no one else who makes such collars. Not for wolves . . ." His voice trailed off into uncertainty as he realized the trap the stranger was baiting. "But I have known no man—none of the humankind—for all the years I have lived here. And that is a long time."

"How long?"

Ly spread his hands. "How can I say? I have not counted the years." He shrugged. "I was young—very young—when I came here." He pointed at a nearby tree, tall and splendid. "That tree was a sapling, no taller than I, when I came here. And you are the first man I have seen since."

"I don't believe it," the stranger said.

Ly felt a slow anger begin to turn about within him. Mama Roo had quietly approached him from his rear and now he was aware that he was flanked by his wolves, the master of this place, and confronted by an enemy. All men were his enemy—how could he have forgotten?

"Go!" he said, raising his voice imperiously. "Go away, stranger. Go, depart. We do not want your humankind here."

To his vast surprise, the stranger began to smile, and

his smile quickly grew broader. Ly looked suddenly around and found himself no longer flanked by Mama Roo and Rox. They lay instead at the stranger's feet, tails thumping on the ground!

Makstarn declined Ly's invitation to enter his hut, but sat with him on the ground outside. Luuk—how strange to think that the wolf had a *name!*—sat close beside him, the older wolf called Rox a short distance away.

They sat and talked, Makstarn and Ly, and for Makstarn the experience was doubly strange. He had not spoken to another man for many months, and that in itself made this experience a refreshing one. But there was more to it than just the opportunity at last for the sound of another's voice: his time for the first time in his life he sat with a man—an adult—and spoke with him as equals, as two grown men together.

"You say your father had a wolf?" Ly asked. "One of my wolves?"

"A wolf with a collar like those worn by your wolves," Makstarn said.

"Did he say how he had come by this wolf, then?"

Makstarn shook his head. "I know only that he came out of the desert with the wolf and befriended my mother's people."

"Out of the desert, you say? With a wolf?" Ly's tones were those of a man who does not wish to seem unbelieving, but remains unconvinced. "Where do your mother's people live, then? Further west?" He gestured vaguely at the upper slope.

"East," Makstarn said. "Beyond the desert."

Ly shook his head. "No," he said, "I am an old man and my hearing is not what it once was. You did not say that."

Makstarn felt the stab of impatience, but only smiled thinly. "East—beyond the desert," he repeated.

"Young man," old Ly said, puffing himself up pontificatingly, "nothing lies to the east of the desert. It is the end of the world—all humankind knows that. To de-

scend the eastern mountains is to go down into the perdition of the all-consuming fire."

Makstarn snorted with disgust. "You speak in ignorance," he said.

"No, not at alll I have gone myself—three days into the flaming hell of that land and on the fourth day I saw where the sun rises up out of a molten pool of fire and knew that if I went on I should be destroyed."

"Look at me," Makstarn commanded.

The old man looked up, eyes sharply focussed.

"I crossed that desert," Makstarn said. "And the wolf . . . Luuk . . . he has crossed it twice."

Ly fell forward, clutching himself and moaning.

"What's the matter, old man?" Makstarn asked, his patience grown short.

Gasping, wheezing, Ly whispered, "A pain—I hurt."

He thought at first the old man was lying—he'd seen more than one elder of his tribe throw fits when no other ruse would win an argument for him—but old Ly's distress was genuine. His face was purpling, his eyes starting from his head, as if he'd been kicked in his stomach. The she-wolf left her cubs and hunched down over her master, keening an eerie whine as she rubbed her muzzle against his shoulder. Makstarn knelt beside the old man and touched his forehead.

Ly's skin was very dry and hot to the touch. His breath came in short panting gasps and his mouth struggled, as if to speak.

"Be still, old man," Makstarn told him. "Don't struggle against it." And then a remarkable thing occurred.

It had begun with the touch of his fingers to the man's head: a tingling almost, but a sensation which seemed to exist beside Makstarn's normal tactile senses. Then the sensation was gone from his fingertips but lodged within his own head. *Old.* He sensed the age of the old man on the ground, lying more quietly now, color paling, breathing easing. *Old and dying.* He was aware as never before in his own brief life of age: the accumulation of seasons, a piling up of the years themselves until they were

a palpable weight that old age could no longer easily bear. He was used to the ravages a body could endure—he had always recovered, rebuilt himself. But the old man who lay here before him had no resilience left: the destruction his body had suffered through his lifetime was permanent, an erosion of life itself. He was dying. This sudden attack was not in itself the coming of Death, but merely a sign of Death's presence, Death's inevitable companionship. Death lived with old Ly as surely as did his wolves. And Death fattened upon his old frail body, slowly consuming it.

There could be no reversal: Makstarn saw that. Death might be held at arm's length, but He would never depart this man. Already they were linked, Ly and Death; already they had become part of one another.

But, if Death's victory was inevitable, it need not be immediate. Makstarn saw this, too. And with this knowledge he felt an inchoate outflow—sensed a need he could himself fulfill for the old man—and brought to him yet a little more time before the end.

These were awarenesses he sensed but did not understand. If he understood anything, it was only this: his touch had brought comfort to Ly, had eased the old man's pain, slowed and deepened his breathing, and, finally, allowed him untroubled sleep. The meaning of this Makstarn did not know, nor did he question it.

The sun slipped through the trees until it was high overhead, a dazzling presence dancing over the green roof of the forest. Makstarn sat quietly beside the sleeping Ly, his wolf and Rox sprawled next to him, one of Mama Roo's cubs curled into a tiny ball of fur asleep against his leg. Ly stirred.

Rox pricked up one ear, and Makstarn saw that Ly's eyes were open and staring at him.

"You have come here to kill me," the old man said in a quavering voice, all bravado gone.

Makstarn shook his head. "No," he said.

"You have taken my wolves," the old man continued.

"No," Makstarn repeated. "You are old. I have seen this thing happen before—to those who are old. But you will not die. Not today."

"No?" Ly asked.

Makstarn allowed his features to crack into a smile and laughed, a wolf-like bark. "No," he said, climbing to his feet and extending his hand down to the other, "not today. Today you slept in the sun and now you must rise once more."

The tingling was in his fingers again as the old man took his hand and pulled himself up. And as Ly came to his feet a kind of youthful energy seemed to suffuse the older man. He seemed taller in the sunlight, and his features less ravaged. As he stood he filled out, and then, as if aware of this strange transformation within himself, Ly laughed too, a peal of joy that rang through the trees and brought sudden yips from the wolf cubs at his feet.

"You're right," he said, his voice stronger, deeper. "My mind has been fuddled by the sun and the sleep. You're right; I forgive you for your doubt in me." And he laughed again and capered among his wolves and they shared his newfound happiness.

# Chapter 14

Makstarn stayed with the old wolf-man throughout the day and evening, sitting across from him at the cooking fire, listening to him tell his rambling tales of other times, other places, and his journey through the mountain forests to this place.

He listened, but with mounting impatience. The man had much to say, but nothing to tell him. Ly had never met his father. It seemed certain that the wolf which had accompanied his father was one of Ly's—no other man tamed wolves but Ly, the old man assured him—just as his own. But how they'd met—the riddle of the wolves—remained unanswered. He knew now his wolf's parentage and origin, but not how the beast had crossed the desert, nor, more important, *why*. Some strange affinity had bound the two of them together from their first meeting—had, perhaps, even brought them together. In some inexplicable way the fates of the wolf, Luuk and he, Makstarn, had become entwined as one.

But although this now seemed obvious to him, it was an obviousness brought out of experience and circumstances and it answered no questions: it only asked more. Was their meeting predestined? Had his father in some strange fashion foreordained it? Was this second meeting of wolf and man a parallel of the first? He didn't know. There was no way to know.

A twig exploded, a sudden loud pop that punctuated the droning of the old man's voice and brought him to a stumbling halt. The night winds moaned softly in the trees overhead, and Makstarn found his heart to be beating furiously where a moment before he had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he had almost fallen asleep.

He looked up, and saw old Ly's watery eyes focused questioningly upon him. *He knows I was not listening,* Makstarn thought, and then felt a flash of anger at the man.

"I shall leave tomorrow," he said.

"Ah," Ly nodded. "You return now to your people."

"No!" He shook his head. "There is no place for me there."

"I am no longer young," Ly began, voice faltering a little, "but—"

He sensed the offer before it was voiced, and shook his head to forestall it. "West," Makstarn said. "Perhaps I shall find my father's people further west."

Old Ly slumped, whether from relief that he need not press an invitation to remain, or from disappointment in losing someone to talk to, Makstarn could not tell. "You'll be disappointed," he said. "They're no better than those you knew."

But his mind was made up: he could not be satisfied until he found the truth for himself. And eating into the back of his mind was the awareness that he had become a wanderer—that he had come a long way and would follow a yet longer path before he finally stopped. "Tomorrow," he repeated.

The dawn was cool and misty, low clouds scudding like fog just above the tree tops, clammy fingers twisting lower. He'd slept in the open, beside the dead embers of the fire, unwilling to enter the stench of the old man's hut. His wolf—Luuk, he must try to remember the name—had slept beside him as was the beast's habit. And the older wolf, Rox, as well.

He rose with the early gray light, unrolled from his dirskin, and rekindled the fire for both its warmth and its cheer. The carved wooden pail in which old Ly had kept water was empty, so he followed a well-trod path down to a creek that wound between the folds of the hill and refilled it.

He stewed some jerky with a few of the wild leeks which he'd found by the creek bank, and was finished with his meal before Ly poked his head from the door of the hut.

The old man seemed shrunken and dazed, stooped and hesitant in his movements. His eyes had gone to the water bucket and a look of pain had passed over his worn face. When Makstarn told him he'd refilled the bucket for him, he only nodded, without speaking and Makstarn felt again the sad knowledge of Ly's age. It seemed that each time the man looked at him, Makstarn's youth only redoubled Ly's awareness of his own old age. It was best to leave now, before he robbed the man of his few remaining days.

"So soon?" Ly asked, as Makstarn made up his pack and readied for his departure.

"The day won't wait," Makstarn said nodding.

"The sun is not yet out," Ly said, a little querulously.

"It may not be, for hours," Makstarn replied. Since he had come to this mountain vastness the mornings had been overcast as often as they were not.

"Have you eaten your fill?" the old man asked.

Makstarn nodded again. "I am finished," he said. "It is not wise to set out with too full a belly."

"I've heard it said one should rest a time—after eating," Ly offered.

"And I have," Makstarn agreed. "Time enough."

Ly stared upwards again, through a space in the trees, as if assessing the weight of the tumbling gray clouds. "It could rain," he said dubiously.

"It could," Makstarn said.

Ly nodded, his voice suddenly firm. "Better you wait the morrow," he said.

Makstarn let a thin smile twist the corners of his lips.

"Today," he said.

"But—"

"I have been wet before. I will be wet again. It does not matter."

"A chill—?" Ly ventured.

"I've survived worse."

"Ah," the old man nodded. "That's so." His shoulders slumped again. "Well . . ." he put his hand on Makstarn's shoulder and Makstarn felt his flesh tingle where the old man's fingers touched him. Their touch was light, like thin reeds. "Go in good health," Ly said. "I am not sorry you came this way." It was a curiously grudging admission, Makstarn sensed, and wrung almost unwillingly from the old man.

"Nor I," he said.

"And you have brought back to Rox his son," Ly added, turning to the two wolves. They sat side by side, haunch by haunch, heads cocked, tongues lolling, father like son, regarding the two men. "I shall have that, anyway."

Ly's hand had fallen from his shoulder, and with it the momentary sense of rapport in which Makstarn had felt his kinship for the humanity of the older man. Now something in his words seemed askew.

Makstarn turned to look at the old man. "Luuk," he said. His wolf's ears pricked up. "Luuk comes with me," he said.

Ly's face seemed beaten out of stone. "This is his home," he said.

"We are bound together," Makstarn said, his tone patient. He put his hand upon Ly's frail arm and found, beside the tingling in his fingertips, an iron-hard strength he had not expected. "We have faced death together," Makstarn said, and as he said this, his mind filled with the images of the desert brightness, the suffocating heat and lancing sunlight, wolf and sun and stone multiplied into blurs of pain.

Then he removed his hand and Ly bowed his head.

And thus they left him, the old man and his wolves, standing in the misty clearing on a gray and dismal morn.

They had left the road more than a day before Luuk had led him to the den of his father, and now had no path to follow west. It didn't matter. The trees were pines and spruce and other evergreens whose fallen needles kept the forest floor clear of underbrush. Here and there were clumps of bushes with curled dark green leaves, and where the ground sloped more steeply the naked rock of the mountain below shelved out. But the way was easily travelled, and Makstarn led the way now slantwise down the southern slope, south and west, hoping to find the road again somewhere not too far ahead.

Ly had told him of other mountain chains and of high passes, bitter cold. If the road itself led through those mountains he was convinced its way would be easiest and best.

He felt strangely adrift now, no longer certain of his goal. It had been nebulous enough before, but now all the more so. His key had been the wolf. Had Luuk been raised by the people from whom his father had come, simply tracing the wolf's origins would have been enough. And indeed, when Luuk had taken him from the road and led him through a succession of climbing valleys he had been convinced that soon enough he would have all the answers to his riddle. The world had moved with such certainty, led the way so eagerly, that all his hopes had buoyed.

To find only the old man and his unkempt den of tame wolves had been a disappointment in itself. To find the man ignorant of his father had been almost crushing.

But nothing could crush Makstarn. The riddle had not been so simple—he understood that now. It was hardly Luuk's fault: the wolf had done its duty nobly. It was his fault for assuming that in the wolf's origin he would discover his own.

Now he could only wander, casting about aimlessly

like a hapless fisherman seeking the golden minnow in the Great River. Somewhere the answers would lie. It awaited only his discovery.

Thus his impatience to be moving—and his reluctance to choose a direction. Who could say where his feet might lead him—or how closely he might pass by the goal he sought, all unaware? How might he search, when he knew not that which he was searching for?

Old Ly had known no one like his father—broad of body and dark like himself—among the people he had renounced. But the old man had admitted knowing only a few, and caring little to meet more. The land was vast—each step of the way only affirmed that!—and his father's people could be hidden in any pocket or valley.

He could only travel on, hoping to find some day a stranger to whom his visage and type were not unfamiliar. He could only trust to luck.

The course he'd picked led Makstarn and the wolf down hillsides and through valleys, up low ridges and down again, across shallow streams that could be easily leaped and through wider ones that had to be forded. The weather was damp and cool and sometimes he awoke with a stiffness in his joints, but walking was warming and after his ordeal in the desert he could only regard this mountainous forest as an idyllic sojourn. Game was plentiful, and the dead lower branches of the evergreen trees made easy kindling for his fires. It rained often, and was damp and overcast on most days when it did not rain, but Makstarn had no complaint.

On the third day after he had left Ly's camp, he sighted the road. He was standing on the crest of a ridge, and although its slope had been gentle to climb, this side gave way suddenly to deep valley. Far below, looking like a black river, the road nestled in the valley's depths.

He'd come further than he'd expected, and the reason was now obvious: the road had curved south to find this low cut through the higher mountains to the west. It

took him a cautious day to descend to the valley's floor and gain the road.

In the days which followed he was not sorry he'd taken to the road again, for it climbed gradually to skirt the lower reaches of tall, impressively craggy mountains, while the nights grew progressively more chill.

When the long shadows of evening fell, he would stop and make camp, foraging off the road for game and firewood. The fire was essential now, and he banked his cooking fire against the rotted logs of fallen trees which he raised a sweat dragging to his campsite. The logs would burn slowly through the night, warm coals remaining on the morning to be blown gently into new flames. He and the wolf curled up together close by the smoldering embers for the steady heat they produced and were grateful for it.

Ten days into the tall mountains, it snowed.

The snow began to fall during the night, and Makstarn awoke in the darkness to feel something cold and wet brushing against his skin like the caress of a ghostly snake. Startled and alarmed, he rolled to a crouch and then sprang to his feet, the wolf, thus rudely awakened, giving a surprised yelp.

Makstarn felt for the tinder he had put aside for morning and threw caution after it onto the coals of the night's fire. The coals were still red, and the twisted knots of dried grass and evergreen twigs burst immediately into bright yellow flames. Still acting out of the alarm he'd felt upon waking, Makstarn thrust one end of a pitch-covered branch into the fire and turned it into a torch, which he waved menacingly about his head.

The light showed him Luuk, the wolf, crouched low against the ground, ears flattened, tail tucked between his legs, teeth bared. Beyond the close circle of light was darkness. But, drifting down over the entire scene were flakes of lightness, glittering moments in the light and vanishing.

Makstarn held out his hand, and watched one the size of his small fingernail settle into his palm. He felt a

momentary kiss of coldness, and the white spot vanished, leaving only a drop of water. He stared at it in amazement.

He had never before seen snow.

As soon as he ceased whirling the torch over his head, the wolf climbed out of its crouch and whined mournfully and rubbed its damp fur against his leg. He felt a moment of shame at his reaction: he had charged from sleep to wakefulness too quickly, and had carried the deep demons of slumber with him, needlessly alarming both himself and the wolf.

But the snow still intrigued him. He returned the torch to the fire and built it up so that he might sit beside it and watch with unfolding wonder as the night around him turned white. The wolf, less easily amused by works of nature, soon curled up against him and fell asleep, but Makstarn stayed awake that night for hours, until the snow had made a thick blanket over his surroundings and at last he could no longer remain awake.

The morning brought with it the sun, and soon the crystal whiteness that covered every tree, every bush and every blade of dead dry grass was melting, dripping in the sunlight like a gentle rain. The road, being black, was the first surface to be uncovered by the sun's warming rays, and by midday the white mantle remained only on the higher slopes and nearby crests of the mountains beneath which the road twisted. They would remain snow covered and white as long as they remained in his view.

But now the road no longer climbed upward. After navigating several sheer passes between stone cliffs the black ribbon began again to unwind itself downward, and Makstarn sensed he was at last coming to the westward edge of the mountain ranges. He was not sorry. He'd had enough of the finger-numbing cold and nights spent uneasily shivering in his sleep. Almost the heat of the desert seemed attractive to him, its oven-warmth a comforting thought. Almost.

But the mountains did not break suddenly. There was no clear descent to an unbroken plain as there had been to the east of the mountains that formed the eastern wall of the desert. Here the mountains grew gradually lower, less rugged and harsh. Broad valleys stretched out, and beyond them more ridges and foothills: mountains in their own right, and mountainous enough anywhere else in the world when not measured against those mountains which were now to his back.

These intervening valleys were green and lush, their gentle sides thick grassy meadows, their floor often divided by lazy rivers and rich forests. Any one of these valleys would have made a better home for his tribe than the one they knew—but more than half a continent and a deadly desert made an unbreachable barrier. Their kind would never see these slopes, never run their herds in this paradise. It was an irony which caught at him and made his chest hurt with an unexpected pang. He had left them so far away and so long ago.

One afternoon he swam a river where the road no longer bridged it, and stopped on its far bank to make a fire and dry himself while enjoying a midday meal. Food was no problem here: Luuk had only to disappear for a few moments into the brush and return with a still-warm animal in his teeth. Makstarn's hand moved with swift practice, and the animal was skinned, cleaned, and spitted over the fire, Luuk gobbling its discarded entrails without ceremony. By the time Makstarn had picked the last shred of meat from between his teeth with a splintered bone, his clothing was again dry enough to don, and the road was regained.

It had happened before and not so differently: only the time of day and the details of place differed. But on this day—he had long ago lost count of the days since he had parted from old Ly—the routine would not continue long.

He strode more quickly than usual along the road, using his body heat to remove the lingering dampness

from his clothing, and as he walked he hummed to himself, a tuneless song to the rhythm of his pace. The road was flat with only a trace of a climbing grade, and arched over on both sides by broad-leafed trees whose dark green leaves filtered the bright sunlight to soft yellow patterns that dappled the ground. The road here was covered with a carpet of dead leaves that were soft underfoot and strewn with fallen branches, resembling the normal litter of a forest floor except for the straightness of the broad avenue. For some reason he could not himself define, Makstarn found himself filled with a great cheerfulness, a buoyancy he'd not felt since he'd been a young child. Luuk too seemed to feel this mood, and frisked and scampered from side to side of the road, now chasing small creatures which scampered up trees or beneath roots, then darting after a bird which had alighted to peck at something among the leaves—running ahead and then dashing back, as full of playfulness as a half-grown puppy, tail flashing from side to side, tongue lolling as if to grin at them all, Makstarn, wood creatures, birds and trees. It was a kind of joy they shared, Makstarn and the wolf: a joy in being alive.

The road mounted a low crest, and then Makstarn discovered a marvelous thing: standing by the side of the road, mounted on a short pedestal, was the figure of a man.

# Chapter 15

The figure was man-sized, and stood on a pedestal the height of Makstarn's waist. Made of stone, or something like stone, the statue was stained by the years to a mottled gray. Leaves lay at its feet and when Makstarn obeyed an impulse and swept them away from his hand, they left overlays of darker stains in outline.

The man—it was a statue of a man—looked down with a kindly expression on his face, a carved beneficence, and held out his right hand as if to assist Makstarn up to a position beside him, although there was no room on the narrow pedestal for a companion. His face was old and somehow wise. He was not bearded, and his hair short, not descending below his shoulders. He was dressed in archaic clothing which appeared to be a series of inner and outer garments, the latter hanging open in the front. His left hand leaned upon a cane. The lower half of the cane was missing: broken off.

Makstarn stared at the statue with wild surmise.

Who had made it, and why? And how had it come to be here, in this forest, at the side of the long-abandoned road? Tree-shaded, beckoning an unspoken invitation, it seemed to stand in welcome to any traveller who found himself on this pleasant forgotten road. Makstarn walked around it, rapped his knuckles against it, tapped it with

he hilt of his knife, and then shrugged in puzzlement. It seemed to exist here to no purpose, but obviously it has been standing here for a very long time: as long, perhaps, as the road itself. In that time whole forests have come and gone, and who was to say why its makers had originally placed it here?

Luuk sniffed at it and then raised his leg against one corner of the pedestal. Makstarn shook his head, gave the statue a bemused smile, and then went on.

Not far beyond they encountered the second statue. This one was on the opposite side of the road, and faced in the opposite direction, to the west.

It too was of time-stained stone or something very like it, and mounted on a low pedestal. But this figure was female—quite obviously so. She was a young woman, and she was enfolded in sculpted swirls of drapery which fell from her shoulder and closed at her waist, below her breasts. Her breasts were bared, but her long hair fell forward over her left shoulder, half covering her left breast and concealing its nipple. Her right nipple was broken off. Her right hand was raised, as if waving to someone in greeting—or to say goodbye. Her face was pretty if not beautiful, and she smiled a warm and gentle smile which seemed to invite one to return again after a time.

Like the first statue, this one seemed to Makstarn remarkably lifelike. It was not simply the fidelity of the sculptor to his subject; these two statues seemed to express two human and individual personalities. Their features were not the perfection of an ideal, but had the stamp of imperfect reality. Makstarn gazed upon the upturned face of the waving girl and felt a pang of sadness that she was lifeless and only a statue by the roadside. It seemed unfair that he should meet her thus. At any moment, he half expected her to come alive, to lower her hand, lean foward, and treat him to a puckish smile. He thought of Rifka, beautiful and spiteful, so far, far away, and as he gazed at the girl on the pedestal he could not recall Rifka's features to match them against

the statue—and he felt another pang, this time of loss. The loss of childhood, of innocence and naivete.

He turned his back on her as he had once before to Rifka. He was not the boy who had known that girl; he wondered if he'd even been.

The road turned a bend and then he saw a sight for which the two statues had only been a foretaste.

Lined up along each side of the tree-lined corridor were rows of pedestals. These were narrower, plinths as tall as his shoulders, and upon each was set a head. Each head stood proudly upon its neck, but where shoulders should have begun there were only the narrow columns. These were the sculpted heads of men, women, boys and girls, each with its own expression: joyousness, sternness, smiles, and frowns, exuberance, and quiet contemplation. So cleverly fashioned that their eyes seemed to follow him as he strode uncertainly up the center of the leafy road towards the object which lay beyond.

He knew no name for it and could recall nothing like it, but it was a vast building, both like and unlike those buildings he had warily explored in the ruined City Shanathor.

It looked like a mass of rectangular blocks, piled upon and beside each other, grouped imposingly into a building which stood to the right side of the road. Its many roofs were flat and gave the impression of irregular steps. It was, on the whole, flat and wide: sprawling in all directions save that of the road. But unlike the monolithic shapes of the towers of Shanathor, this great building was covered over with ornamentation: animal shapes crouched at the corners of the eaves, balconies jutted from nearly every flat wall which was not already broken by windows, and the balconies were railed with elaborate sconces.

It was, like the statues that guarded the lane, quite old. Some walls had fallen, and grasses had taken root in those crevices where leaves had collected and decayed, while whole trees sprang from the roofs and vines climbed the walls and pulled at the balconies. Roofed

over by the boughs of the trees, the great house hulked darkly, its windows and doors opening into a black interior abyss.

And yet it was not forbidding. Perhaps because of its flowery ornamentation, perhaps the way it had become assimilated into the very forest—or, perhaps because of the humanity of the faces sculpted along its approach, it seemed to beckon Makstarn, to say, *Enter, Man: I've been waiting a long, long time for the sound of your step, the peal of your laughter, to break the silence I've endured.*

Luuk sniffed enquiring at the building's portals, and showed no fear. The place had probably housed many of the creatures of the forest down through the long years of its vacancy. Makstarn stepped upon the building's sill and looked inside.

Soft beams of filtered sunlight probed weakly through the empty windows, patches of murky yellow etched upon the walls and floors. Once inside, Makstarn found the place less gloomy than he had expected. His eyes adjusted to the light and he found himself in a great hall, an entryway from which branched many wide doors, and at the end of which a sweeping staircase climbed upwards.

The floor was littered with the residue of the forest: old leaves and branches, a few well-gnawed bones, moss in a corner which received both sunlight and rain from a nearby window. The walls themselves were friezes: bas-relief sculptings of men and women in various stately reposes. Here and there a bit of color lingered: proof that once these friezes had been painted in lifelike hues. Makstarn felt a sense of great awe envelop him, as if he had come to stand in the dwelling place of the gods, a place now long deserted by them.

They were only men, he knew. Once men had built a mighty civilization upon this land, carved out roads like the one he'd trod, built cities like the City Shanathor, done great deeds and celebrated them with marvelous monuments. But he'd known this as a distant truth, like a

myth, a tale of what-once-was and now as if never-was. To confront this place and its stark reminders that the myth was real, the truth immediate—it raised the hair on the back of his neck: wolf-like, he bristled.

He explored the place for the rest of the day, knowing quite well that it had no connection with his father, but loathe to leave it until he felt he understood it—at least a little. He roamed its rooms and halls and galleries, finding here and there the decayed remnants of the house's more perishable furnishings. Dry wood that fell into dust when he disturbed it, metallic fabric hangings half eaten by corrosion, bits and pieces of shiny metal that once served incomprehensible purposes . . . and the nests of animals built into corners, birds which flapped noisily from their perches at the sight or sound of him, a small wood-creature which Luuk brought proudly to him as a prize . . . the place was not truly *empty*.

But when the sun fell and the wood darkened, he returned outdoors to make his camp for the night, no longer willing to share the great house with the many ghosts and shadows of its past.

Dawn had not yet come when Luuk nosed him into wakefulness. Makstarn opened his eyes, blinked, saw only darkness, and pulled his dirskin closer around him. But Luuk persisted. The wolf whined a low, almost inaudible sound and bumped his cold nose against Makstarn's face.

He reached out to push the wolf away, but when his fingers touched the animal's head he felt the rigidity in Luuk's stance: the wolf sensed something.

Then he heard it himself: a rustling movement among the leaves that paved the road. It came from the west with the sound of many men.

*Raiders? Here?* That was impossible, he knew, but yet he knew that sound, the sound of many feet trudging through the dried leaves, marching in his direction.

He would not be trapped again—by any man! Swiftly

now he came to his feet and gathered up his few things by the gray pre-dawn light. Only too late did he think of the embers of his cooking fire, close by. They were cold; he could only hope they would go unnoticed.

He slipped into the entrance hall of the deserted manor, and, led by his sharp memory of the previous day's explorations, went swiftly to the stair and up it. There was a balcony he could easily reach where he might spy upon the passersby and yet go unseen himself.

Soon he was crouching there. Luuk had gone somewhere else, but he trusted the wolf to take care of itself.

Birds were stirring, their early-dawn calls resounding from the nearby trees. From somewhere up the road the rustling grew louder, came closer.

He looked upward and saw between the close-locked limbs of the trees overhead small patches of graying sky. He looked downward and the road was a misty trail in the early light.

Worse, the black coals of his campfire were an ugly sore—quite easily visible. They were on a cleared part of the side of the road, close by the entrance to the great stone manor. Had he drawn arrows on the road, the message could not be more obvious! Struck by this, he remained frozen by the low parapet of the balcony.

Then a ground animal ran skittering over the leaves from the middle of the road and chattering up the nearest tree. A raucous bird somewhere overhead became silent. And Makstarn felt the nape of his neck prickle with anticipation.

A band of men marched into view: moving with a strolling ease, they nonetheless kept a ragged formation as they came down the road toward him.

They were shapeless figures in the dawn's thin light, all shadows and indistinctness. They appeared cloaked and hooded, tall—but hunched over and even humpbacked. For a moment Makstarn's skin crawled with fear: could they be the risen spirits of those who had once lived in this great place?

They advanced slowly, a strangling band of men. Then one of them among the forefront pointed—directly at the charred remains of Makstarn's fire.

They exchanged no audible words, but as one they stopped, grouping around the cleared place and the dead coals. One of them stooped and touched a leaf, then straightened. All turned and stared at the vast building—and Makstarn felt their gazes must surely impale him where he crouched.

But now something odd: one of them moved up from the rear to touch the one who had fingered the leaf, and spoke aloud. Makstarn could not distinguish the words, but the voice was youthful, high-pitched. And he could see the figure was shorter, thinner, and unstooped in posture. The other shook his head, murmured something soft and apparently reassuring. The smaller one nodded and moved back.

Then, again as if the thought of one commanded all, the strange men moved purposefully into the building's entrance, directly below. Only the two figures who had spoken hung back, waiting.

Makstarn moved closer to the wall, trying to conceal himself among the vines, but he knew that if the balcony was explored he would be found.

Something about these strange men, so silent and certain in their movements, frightened him far more than had the loud and boastful raiders. Their very silence and purposefulness was eerie and ominous. It was not human.

He waited, crouched, for a long time. The sky lightened and the trees became distinct. If he craned his head he could catch a glimpse of the eastern sky: it was very blue. He divided his attention between a catalogue of his surroundings and their minute, moment to moment changes, the sounds of exploration within, and the two who remained below, the site of his campfire. They attracted his attention the most.

The bigger one had rekindled the fire, and slung down

a pack from his back. When he straightened again, his hump was gone. Then he occupied himself with half-glimpsed chores at the fire, while the other spoke to him in a low voice, apparently asking questions although he gave few answers.

Then a smell drifted up: a richly seasoned soup or broth. A long-forgotten odor—instantly Makstarn's appetite awakened and he had to force himself to look away from the big kettle somehow miraculously suspended from a tripod over the fire.

Several times he'd hear a soft footfall approach the doorway to the balcony, and each time the investigator had turned away in time. This time he was caught unaware, his attention focused on the scene below as the smaller one's voice was raised almost to the point of audibility—something warned him and he turned, to stare face to face at a hooded man standing close by on the balcony.

Until that moment he had not known which he would do: draw his knife, or flee. But a glimpse into the narrow, hawk-like features of the man who confronted him was sufficient: in one smooth movement, Makstarn flung himself up and over the low railing, and down into the maze of vines which cloaked the side of the house.

He had an instant's feeling of suspended time and motion as he seemed to float gracefully over the parapet. Then, suddenly, he was crashing to the vines, clawing clumsily at them, and trying with mad and impotent haste to untangle himself and work quickly downwards. The vines clutched at him, imprisoned him, snatched at him, and he felt time racing like the hammer-beat of his heart against his chest: a nightmare of agonizing panic. Then he was free, dangling, and he dropped the last half dozen feet to the ground, hitting in a crouch and springing erect to dash away—and a pair of sinewy arms were around him, crushing his own arms against his chest and pinning him.

Makstarn slumped and threw his weight forward, sur-

prising his captor and tossing him over his shoulders. Then he stepped back and stopped, astonished.

Climbing to his feet and turning to face him was not a man, but a winged travesty of a man! Its cloak was gone, and as it stood, it flexed great wings of shiny black which stretched to a span twice its height. Its face was human in appearance—if one avoided its eyes—and its body tall and thin. It spread its arms like a fighter, and they too were thin and frail in appearance—quite deceptive of its real strength.

Makstarn heard a flapping sound, and looked up to see two others launch themselves from the balcony to half glide, half fall, to the ground surrounding him. Trapped with his back to the wall, Makstarn could only draw his knife and wait for the inevitable.

But they did not advance upon him, apparently content for the moment to keep him here. Soon they were joined by the others—on foot, still cloaked, from the building entrance—and by the two from the campfire. They massed around him and stared silently upon him, making no threatening move and careful to remain outside his reach. To this moment they had uttered not one sound. But now:

"Lorex—?" It was the slight one—and as she spoke he knew her voice for a girl's. She put her hand on the arm of the other one, to whom she had spoken before.

"Stay back, girl," came the deep-voiced reply. "This is a wild one and looks dangerous."

His attention had been caught for a moment and diverted: it was enough.

Immediately they were upon him, leaping from both sides at once in perfect teamwork. They seized his wrists and his arms and held them apart. Their grip was iron and he could not even feel the hasp of his knife as it slipped from his numb fingers. He staggered under their weight and fell, his mind roaring with a savage scream that never left his lips. Silent, were they? He would be no less—even in defeat.

Strong fingers clutched at the back of his neck in a pinching movement, sounds rushed into his ears and filled them as he sank gratefully into the oblivion of darkness.

# Chapter 16

Makstarn awoke from a dream of suffocation to find himself staring up into the soft eyes of the girl.

He was lying on his back, his ankles trussed together and his wrists also bound. Something sharp was digging into his right shoulder blade and his feet were numb and without feeling. The girl's face hovered over his for another moment and then withdrew. His forehead felt wet and cool and he heard the slosh of water as she shifted away from him.

"He is awake," she said in a low voice.

Makstarn turned his head a little. She was kneeling at his side, her upper body half twisted away from him as she spoke over her shoulder. She looked curiously soft—young, but not young as the girls of his childhood had looked. There seemed to be no tension in her, no wariness. When she turned back to him her large brown eyes had the limpid look of a herds animal.

"You must not struggle," she said. Her voice was a whisper, the caress of a breeze.

But Makstarn it was like a sharp slap—like a goad. He had been lying quiescent, taking stock, gathering all the information his senses could deliver—waiting. Now, in one fluid movement, he sat up and reached out with his bound hands, his fingers clutching at the fabric which tied his feet.

He had been tied with strips of cloth, and they ripped easily. Immediately he was on his feet and—

—stumbling to his knees.

His feet wouldn't hold him. Numb, lifeless, empty of blood, they collapsed under his weight and threw him to the ground, kneeling arms outstretched before him, heart hammering.

He awaited death defiantly.

It did not come.

Slowly, the red film of rage left his vision and a coolness filled his brain.

Watching him with soundless calm were the winged men, seated in a semicircle on the ground.

Overhead, the tall leafy boughs of the trees made a nearly impenetrable roof through which only scattered chinks of sunlight fell.

Closer to him, the girl, also watching, waiting—expecting?

Was this a *test?*

He twisted around to survey the scene behind him: *Where was the road? And where had that vast building gone?*

Luuk! The wolf—*where was the wolf?*

As if in direct answer, a distant howl sounded, long, low, mournful, its ululations climbing and falling in one drawn out breath. He tried to isolate the direction from which it came, but the sound was diffused by the trees, and he could not even guess the position of the sun.

And still they sat watching him, silently motionlessly.

In his mind he answered the wolf call, a cry of mental anguish that felt torn from his innermost feelings. And in reply, joining and blending with his own call, came again the distant howl of the wolf. He knew it for his wolf: Luuk.

One of the winged men shifted his position—an almost imperceptible movement. Makstarn's eyes flew to him,

then—jarringly—linked. They locked stares for a timeless moment which seemed infinitely stretched.

Then:

"Oh, Lorex," cried the girl, breaking the silent tableau, "What is happening?"

*What indeed?* Makstarn felt the tension that had built snap and vanish like smoke into clear air. Sanity seemed to return to him then and he sat back on his haunches and thrust out his still-bound hands.

"Who are you, Winged Men? And what do you to me?"

The one with whom he had been exchanging stares moved, and a thin smile appeared on his face. "I am Lorex," he said. "I am First Captain of the Eastern Arath Expeditionary Force. These—" he swept his arm, "are my men."

Makstarn's glance went to the girl.

"She is a human," Lorex said in ready reply. "An outcast from her own people. She chooses to link her fate with ours." A wry twist to his lips: "Mine," he corrected himself.

"As for you," the winged man continued, "I know not what we should do with you. We took you at first for little more than a wild animal, but I sense you are nothing of the sort."

"I am as human as she," Makstarn said, nodding at the girl.

"As Cilla?" Lorex said. "No, I believe not. You are like no human I have ever met before." His expression sharpened. "*Where is the rest of you?*"

Makstarn shook his head. "You ask riddles."

Lorex leaned closer. "You *are* a riddle," he replied. "But this I know: You exist in symbiote. You have your own, ahh, Lothian."

"Words!" cried Makstarn. "Meaningless words! Unfetter me." He held out his hands again.

"The howl," Lorex said, ignoring Makstarn's outburst. "We heard it. And—sensed your own."

*They knew about the wolf, then.* Makstarn switched

tactics abruptly: "Where are we? How far have you taken me?"

"From the ruin? Not far," Lorex said. "It was better to leave such a place undisturbed by strong emotions."

"The road?" Makstarn asked.

Lorex glanced to Makstarn's left, but answered only, "Not far."

"Will you free me?" Makstarn demanded.

"How can we trust you?" Lorex replied.

"How can you trust any man?" Makstarn returned.

Lorex smiled and shook his head. "You are no ordinary man," he said. "Your existence poses a puzzle to us."

"This kind of talk leads nowhere," Makstarn said. "Release me and let me go my own way."

"Ah, and what way is that?"

Makstarn said nothing.

Lorex watched him, waiting, patient.

"You come from the west," Makstarn said after a long silence.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"You've never been there?"

"No."

"I see," Lorex said. "Very well, then. It remains a rugged, mountainous land, pocketed with small valleys of peacefulness, and at its edge is the sea."

"The—sea?"

"Ocean. Water—beyond the horizon for half the world."

"I have never seen that," Makstarn said, musingly. "And beyond the, ahh, sea?"

"Another land. My own."

"Ah." Makstarn nodded. "This is not your land, you say."

Lorex shook his head.

"Why have you come here, then?"

Lorex smiled. "For a lost cause," he said. "But you—you too are a stranger here?"

Makstarn agreed. "From the east," he said. "Across the high mountains and the Great Desert."

Lorex's eyes widened. "A desert, you say! Easily travelled?"

Makstarn grunted. "No!"

"Beyond the desert—a city?" Lorex persisted.

"How did you know?"

"Standing—or in ruins?"

"Both. Few men will go there."

"What is its name?"

Makstarn thrust forward his hands again. "Untie me," he said.

Lorex looked closely at him. "We could be of value to each other," he said, dubiously. "What is it that has brought you so far from your home? What is it *you* seek?"

Makstarn shrugged. "My people," he said.

"Ah, but, I thought . . ."

"My *father's* people."

"So." Lorex fell silent for a moment, and Makstarn sensed that his mind had gone elsewhere. He glanced around at the others, sitting so silently that they might be carven statues like those along the road. They too seemed preoccupied by distant thoughts—and in an intuitive flash Makstarn knew that they were communicating, that these winged men had no need to speak aloud among themselves.

Then Lorex stood and came to Makstarn. From his side he drew a knife—Makstarn's knife—and with one swipe parted the bindings at Makstarn's wrists. Then he dropped the knife, point downwards, to stick upright in the dirt.

Makstarn rubbed his wrists, first one, then the other. Then he picked up his knife, fingered it—assessing it, testing its edge, reaffirming its worth—and returned it to its place at his side.

"Now," Makstarn said, "Now, we can talk as *men*."

They talked, then, still wary with each other but in-

creasingly less so. The thrust of Lorex's conversation was his desire to find a city—the "City Shorgot, a legend in its own time."

The hours deepened into evening, and others among the winged men came in from the forest with game and with the assistance of the human girl, Cilla, began the preparation of the dinner meal.

Still, Makstarn and Lorex talked, each seemingly unaware of the advancing dusk. For Makstarn there was all that the Arath had learned upon landing on this western land—the people, the places, the possibilities of others like himself. But while Lorex spoke to him freely about those humans he had met—"a suspicious and beggarly lot, by the rule"—he professed ignorance of any like Makstarn.

Makstarn in his turn found himself describing the nomadic society from which he had come, the raiders, and most especially the abandoned City Shanathor. The winged man asked many questions about that city, but seemed to find little enlightenment in Makstarn's answers.

"I must see this City Shanathor of yours," he announced at last. "Will you take us there?"

Makstarn shook his head. "No. I have no desire to recross the Great Desert, and little taste for meeting my mother's people again. If you are so foolhardy as to want to cross the desert, I can give you directions easily enough: just follow the road."

"That might not be necessary," Lorex said. "I think—"

He interrupted himself and whirled to stare across the clearing, where the other winged men were also staring in startlement and surprise.

Eyes gleaming in the reflected light of the cooking fire, a massive beast stood by the clearing's edge.

Makstarn felt a bark of joy welling up in his throat—and an instant later his ears were filled with the wolf's own happy barks as it bounded across the open ground to join him.

For several moments beast and man were inseparable.

Luuk jumped and frisked, tail wagging furiously, while Makstarn pummeled the big animal, pulled its ears, and rolled with it on the ground. When at last their reunion was over, Lorex remarked, with a light smile,

"I see you at last a whole person, I think."

And Makstarn realized quite suddenly that this was true.

While they ate a common meal, Makstarn was sharply aware of the curious inconsistencies in the behavior of this strange group of winged men. They spoke seldom, and then usually for the enlightenment of Makstarn or the girl. But once at ease around the fire, they seemed relaxed, almost sportive and quite unlike their earlier stance. They laughed—soundless laughter which sometimes convulsed them and often left their mouths distended in what might have easily been mistaken for agony.

It was hard, even with Lorex occasionally speaking to them—largely as a courtesy, it seemed to Makstarn—to avoid the feeling that the winged men were enjoying some strange joke at the two humans' expense. And this feeling seemed to draw Makstarn and Cilla closer to each other, to give them a common bond.

They did not speak to each other—indeed, speech was difficult under such silent circumstances—but Makstarn found himself glancing often at the girl, and, as the meal wore on, meeting her gaze each time in return.

The first time his eyes had met hers, he dropped his glance to the strange black metal bowl in her hands, feeling in his own hands the bowl he'd been given as he did so. She had murmured, "Their customs are still often strange to me, too," on that occasion, and he realized she thought him covertly studying her meal manners.

He felt his face warm with the realization—or had it begun before that?—and he felt at once much younger and smaller, like a boy again.

He busied himself with his own bowl then, dipping

out the shards of meat and sipping at the broth. But when he looked up at her again, he found her eyes still upon him—and this time it was she who hastily looked down.

He let his gaze remain upon her, watching the play of the firelight over her features. Her profile was unlike that of the girls he had known—bred of different stock, her cheekbones higher, chin more pointed, nose smaller, short and upturned and unlike the long straight noses of his mother's people. Her hair had seemed brown when first he'd seen her; now he saw the flashes of red and gold in it. Her skin was tawny, her eyes large and long-lashed. He had thought her appearance strange and not a little repulsive when he had first opened his eyes to find her leaning over him, that afternoon. Now he found himself fascinated by the curves of light and shadow that lined her face, and when her eyes looked up again into his, they seemed not at all docile, but sparkling and alive.

The meal at once dragged on endlessly in the unnatural silence of the Arath—and sped by all too quickly for the interchange of looks and speaking glances which passed between them.

When the meal was done, Makstarn rose, stretching his legs, and said, to Lorex but also to the girl, "I must take a short walk."

Both understood. Luuk rose from a bone upon which he had been gnawing, and moved up to Makstarn's side, following him out of the clearing and into the forest.

Man and beast each tended simply and quickly to his own needs, but Makstarn felt unwilling to return directly to the encampment in the clearing. He needed the time to think, to try to understand, to reconcile all which he had heard. He chose a fallen tree, and sat down with Luuk at his feet.

These winged men—*Arath,* they called themselves—were curiously human in their essential alienness. Or was it that their humanity was tainted by an alien quality?

He could not resolve the puzzle they posed. Intelligent, bound on a quest which had taken them (they said) more than half way around the world.

*Around the world!* Think on that! The world—the land, as he knew it—extended itself far beyond his imaginings. There were *other* lands—hard not to think of them as other *worlds*, for indeed was that not the explanation for these strange and silent tall men with wings: that they were of another world?—and somehow all these lands, divided by bodies of water like the Great River, only unimaginably wider, were part of a single body, too vast for belief, which was shaped like a—*a ball!* His fist knotted in unconscious simulation.

It seemed at once preposterous and believable. He had always sensed that a larger order existed over all than he had yet glimpsed. This, then, was the answer—or part of the answer at least.

He felt a sense of elation as he considered it: if he were to journey to the west far enough, he should approach his own lost home—*from the east!* All his tedious youth he had searched for answers such as these, only to be met with the single refrain, "This land is our world, boy. Look upon it, know it, and you will know the answers you seek." You might as easily fathom the secrets of the Great River from a skinful of water drawn at its bank! Ah, but thus the ignorant passed along their wisdom of conciliation.

His mood fell when he considered the implications to his own quest in this new information.

In all the lands to the immediate west, at least those through which the winged men had travelled, there were no people like himself—no one who might in fact be his father's people.

And Lorex had ranged for some distance up and down the coast before turning inland, the winged man had said. How likely was Makstarn to do better? The way ahead seemed as barren as that he had put behind.

And yet, and yet, this land was only the nearest! Beyond it lay a whole world about which he knew noth-

ing. A whole world to be explored! He might as easily find a cast-away toothpick in the Great Desert! Without conscious volition, he threw into the darkness of the woods the bone sliver with which he had been cleaning his teeth.

So much to see, so far to go! The task was endless!

And so he sat, brooding the one moment, buoyed again the next, until he heard a rustle among the underbrush and a twig snapped.

He looked up. The crimson moonlight was thin and filtered, but he saw her shape among the trees.

"Mak—Makstarn," she called quietly. "Are you there?"

## Chapter 17

He sighed. "Over here," he called out.

She stumbled as she came upon him, falling forward and crying out.

Automatically, his hands reached out, seized her right shoulder and left waist and held her while she caught her balance. Automatically, his left hand dropped from her shoulder as she regained her feet—but something stopped his right hand.

Then her hand was over his, clumsy, half catching his wrist, holding his hand there, against her side.

The jut of her hip was under his hand: firm yet so very soft under his fingertips. He had never imagined another human being could feel like that, never supposed that this was the feel of a female.

She seemed to be trembling under his touch.

"L-Lorex sent me," she blurted. "He wants to talk to you."

"He shall," said Makstarn, "in all good time. But sit down here—beside me. I think I'd rather talk to you."

"But—"

"I'll see Lorex later. I've been most of a day talking to him already. With you, I've exchanged only a few words. Tell me about yourself. He said you were an outcast. What did he mean?"

She shifted nervously beside him, as if trying to find a

comfortable spot on the tree trunk. Her leg brushed against his, a caress of warm skin. Haltingly, she began to talk, to tell Makstarn about her downfall and disgrace. She spoke in a very low voice while describing the way in which she had gone to First Captain Lorex and shame filled her voice as she described what had happened. "I lost my soul, and my own father disowned me," she whispered. "I could do nothing else. I followed the First Captain and begged him to take me with him, since I had lost my soul on his account."

"But—this 'soul'," Makstarn broke in. "What is it? What does it feel like—when you lose it?"

"Terrible," she said. "So empty, so alone and lonely."

"I don't understand," Makstarn repeated. "What is this thing you call your 'soul?' "

"I—I can't describe it," Cilla answered, her face averted. "I only know how awful it is to lose it. Only when it's gone can you realize how much a part of you it was."

"What happened to you, then? Did Lorex give it back to you?" Makstarn asked.

She shook her head, her long hair flying out and brushing over Makstarn's left shoulder and arm. "He said he did not have it," she said. "He didn't want me to come with him, either. But I begged and I begged and where he went, I followed. Finally he said to me, 'I can't give you back the soul you lost, girl, but I can give you one that's quite as good.' "

"And—did he?"

"Yes," she said. "And I feel much better."

"No longer lonely?" Makstarn asked.

"A little . . ." she admitted. "But not—*lost*, the way I was before. Lonely for my own kind, I guess." She turned her face then and a stray moonbeam washed it with pink as she gave him a shy look.

"How did he do it?" Makstarn asked, unwilling to leave the subject just yet. "How did he give you a soul again?"

"It was the night of the third day," Cilla said. She sat a

little straighter, shoulders no longer slumped, and her voice was firmer, no longer ashamed. "He brought me to a place by the fire where he and his men were sitting, and told me to sit down among them. Then he told me that I must share a ceremonial food with them, and he brought a steaming chunk of meat from the mealpot. He passed the meat to one of his men, and that man bit off a small piece and ate it. That man passed it to the man next to him, and he ate a piece. Each man ate a piece and then the First Captain gave it to me, and I ate a piece. By then it was very small, and he finished it off with one last bite. Then he said to me, 'You have eaten with us, and you have been sitting among us, and now you are one of us, Cilla, and your soul is born anew.'"

"Is that all?" Makstarn asked. Surely there was more to this soul business than a shared meal.

"Yes," she said, nodding affirmation. "I felt it immediately, and I was no longer frightened."

*Lorex just made her feel a part of a people again,* Makstarn thought to himself. *That's what she really wanted.* Aloud he said, "You call him 'the First Captain.' Do you hold him so greatly in awe?"

"'In awe?'" she repeated. "No, it is not that. And I do not always call him that. But he is a leader—like my father. He must be respected. And—he has adopted me, after all."

"As a daughter," Makstarn asked, "or as a—?"

Cilla turned her back on him abruptly. "You mock me," she said. "You're being spiteful—!"

"No, no," Makstarn protested. "You misunderstand." He put out his hands in a tentative manner, touching the back of her shoulders lightly. "You had said—" he checked himself. "I mean, at the beginning—" He was saying it completely wrong; he knew that. He could feel the tension, the rigidity in the set of her body. Her shoulders shook, ever so slightly, under his hands.

"It's just—" he burst out, "that I want to *know!*"

She broke free of him and turned around to face him.

Her cheeks gleamed wetly. "Why?" she cried, "why *you*?"

"Because," he choked, then forced the words out: "I—I want you—want you to be *free*—for me . . ."

His hands were on her arms; she had been trying to draw herself back. Suddenly she went limp and fell forward against him, full in his arms. He tightened his embrace, feeling awkward and clumsy, knowing none of the right things to do, the only caresses that came to him easily, the caresses he had bestowed upon occasion to the wolf in play—yet feeling a *need*, a need to touch and to hold, to be *with* this girl as he had never been close to any human before her.

Then, as had happened before, with Ly, he felt a tingling in his fingertips. The girl was lying within his arms, against his chest, curled into a small bundle that he could hold, her body shaking with slow sobs and the uneven intake of breath. She needed him. He felt that, suddenly and vividly. She needed him, as no other human being had ever needed him.

He began to fill his mind with bright and sunny images: pictures called from his memory of the beautiful lands and glades through which he'd passed: a sheltered mountain meadow filled with yellow flowers on an overcast day, aglow with warmth; a forest spot where he had spent a night, the breezes sighing softly in the evergreens on a mellow golden dusk; a rippling bubbling, burblingly happy little stream that lept and fell over smooth-worn rocks and pebbles in the morning sunlight —and the lazy pool into which it fed, where breakfast had awaited, eager almost to be caught and consumed . . .

The quiet, tranquil scenes were best, he discovered. Her body became more relaxed, her breathing more even while he summoned up those peaceful images. He pictured for her a summer afternoon, lying on his back as a young boy, staring into the sky while the herd grazed by; the clouds so majestic, so large and tumbled upon each

other, all subtle colors of yellows and oranges and the lightest blues. The grass tickling his back, the easy drone of nearby insects in the air, his occasional wave of a hand when something flew too close. A bird in the overhead tree. A lazy song for a warm afternoon. His belly full and body contented, his mind far, far above . . .

But tumbling after the image came others, summoned by it: a tossed pebble striking his arm, startling him from his summer reverie; a kaleidoscope of images then of the other children, taunting him, teasing him, tormenting—

Her muscles stiffened her erect then, and she raised herself from the nest of his arms into which she'd burrowed, pushed herself up to regard him with warm, sad eyes. She reached out and with a single finger traced the line from his brow to his cheek, and down to his jaw. "You also—an outcast?" she asked softly.

He felt a great welling up of emotion from somewhere deep inside of him, surprising him with its intensity—with its very existence.

He nodded, mute. His eyes felt dry and hot, as if coated with grains of sand. Then a single seering tear fell from each to tremble on his cheeks.

Her finger found each tear, touched them each and brushed them both away. "How easy—to know—to understand . . . you," she said. Then she came into his arms again, this time not for comfort but to comfort. Her face buried itself in his neck, and he found his own mouth against her cheek, near her ear, her hair a nest in which to hide for a moment. So young, this girl—so young! His lips moved against her skin, and as if in wordless reply, hers moved against his neck, his shoulder.

"Cilla—" he said. "I've never—"

"Nor I," she said. "We'll learn together."

"My skin still tingles," she said. Her voice was dreamy.

Makstarn smiled into the darkness. "Like this?" he asked, tracing a filagree with his fingertips down the val-

ley between her small breasts, over her stomach and down the inside of her nearer thigh.

Her body lept in miniature spasms against his fingers. His tingling touch seemed to reawaken each individual nerve ending in her skin with a tantalizing, ticklish spark of energy. And although happily spent, she responded with residual twinges of her final orgasm.

They lay side by side on the forest floor in a flattened nest of dried leaves and grasses. Their legs were still intertwined, moist sweat gluing them together. A breeze wafted overhead, stirring the leaves of the trees into an aimless bustling that died away just as a lower current dipped to trail its own cool fingers over their glowing skin.

"Like that, yes," she said, letting the last word trail off into a sigh of contentment.

They'd had little need to talk while first exploring each other. His touch—the skin-tingling signal—seemed to leap the gap between their minds, flooding them each with the other's feelings, desires, wants.

And when they were joined together, their bodies seemed to melt into each other, their embrace so total that they became a single striving entity. He had had no knowledge of this—no prior awareness that it would be—that it *could* be—like this. But his sense of clumsiness slipped so easily away from him as he became part of her feline grace, and her own ignorance, no less than his, surrendered itself to their mutual trust.

Their bodies understood better than they when the time was ready, and because they shared totally in each other's feelings, there was no brutality in that first entrance, and little pain. She could borrow of his own fresh excitement and pleasure when necessary, and give to him her sense of sublime sensuality. They had become as one. Envy them: their discovery was unique.

Now was a time of resting, of relaxing and letting go. Of confidence in each other that allowed them each to let go at last. Now was a time for Luuk, the wolf to rise

yawn and make that strangled almost-howl in the back of his throat and come to them, sniffing at their bodies and nuzzling against them.

Luuk stuck out his tongue and licked moistly over Makstarn's face.

Cilla laughed as Makstarn jerked into a sitting position, wiping at his face and snuffling and shaking his head. Her laughter pealed out through the forest as she reached for and drew him back down to her, and Makstarn joined her laughter as he hid his face from the puzzled wolf.

Lorex looked up from the object he was studying and regarded the two humans calmly as they entered the clearing together. *Sending her after him was the right move, then,* he noted with approval. Half the night had passed.

*They please each other,* Loroloth commented. *That much, then, is off your hands.*

Mentally, Lorex snorted. *Easily enough! But that leaves me no diversion from the task at hand.*

*Your task is but the prelude,* was the Lothian's only rejoinder.

The two humans made a good pair, Lorex thought. The young man had still the look of a wild animal, dark, scared, eyes sunken but gaze penetrating. His expression seemed dreamy now, though: *Perhaps this thing will be less difficult after all.* Next to the young man, the girl was a vine growing over a rock, all curves and flowing movements—*Arath-like*—and she stayed so close to him that it almost seemed a single mind must guide their legs, else they trip and stumble over each other.

The man was almost swaggering—or was that a stagger, brought on by fatigue?—as he approached.

"You wanted to talk with me again?" he asked, his thick tone verging on insolence in its smug conceit. O man! O horny buck! Do they all walk like that and talk

stab of envy bring the bitterness of bile to his tongue.

"I did," Lorex replied ironically. "Please sit down."

The young man did, pulling down next to him as he did so, the girl, Cilla, uninvited. He bestowed upon Lorex an open smile of readiness. "Yes?" he asked.

"You will recall my remarking earlier upon my desire to know your City Shanathor?" Lorex opened.

"I haven't changed my mind," the human said.

"Ah, but I am proposing something altogether different," Lorex said. "Avoiding all necessity for desert treks on my part—or for coastal exploration on yours."

"What sort of talk is this?" replied the human. By the sound of him, his mind was sharpening up a good bit. Mustn't do this clumsily.

"Ah, 'talk.' That's it, don't you see? We've talked much about the places we've been, both you and I, Makstarn, but talk cannot satisfy us. I thirst to see your ruined city. You remain unconvinced that we found no trace of a people like yourself. We are aware that words do not precisely convey our meanings, that a word may mean one thing to you, and something slightly different to me. Talk can lead us just so far—and no farther. We must, need, transcend talk, words."

'What do you mean?" Leaning closer, now. Cilla forgotten on his opposite side. Got him netted! Now to gather him in without losing him . . .

"Suppose, for a moment—just suppose!—there was a way whereby you could enter my mind and my memories became *your* memories—!" Lorex stopped short. The human's eyes had widened, and his face was betraying all the signs of wariness, possibly fear. He hurried on, suddenly uncertain of himself: "It would be as if you had walked where I walked, you had talked when I talked, and you'd *seen*, Makstarn, everything I'd seen, *with your own eyes!*

"Suppose that. And suppose in turn that your memories became mine and I could remember as if I had been there, as if I had explored it, the ruined City Shanathor!

I would never need to make the desert journey! And need never ask your guidance across it if I required such guidance. Suppose Makstarn, just suppose—!

"Suppose we could join our minds in that way, Makstarn, so that in a single instant each would have recourse to all the other knew: Could you do it? Would you?"

The human's expression had changed again. Now he appeared to be mulling the point seriously in his own mind—without a single question about its possibility! He looked up. "There could be no deception in such a thing," he said, his tone half asking, half stating.

"No," said Lorex. "It is a sacred act, unique save for the act of Lothian mating."

Makstarn shot him a sharp look. "You have something in mind. What?"

"I *must* trust you," Lorex said. "For in order to explain to you I must explain my own, ahh, nature—as a being.

"I am not a single person, like most humans other than yourself. I am two persons in one body. I am as you see me: an Arath, winged and man-like. But I am also a Lothian, a creature that lives inside my Arath body, with a mind of its own.

"The Lothians, Makstarn, are not of this world, and they are helpless when outside the bodies of their host. But when they are joined with their host-bodies, they lend great powers to those bodies. The most important is that the Lothian can speak and hear *thoughts*. Unless they are inside your body, they cannot hear your thoughts or speak into your mind. But they can speak to each other over some distance—although not far enough—and they make it possible for each of us to 'talk' to each other through our Lothians.

"Now then: There is an act by which two, ahh, people may gain direct access to each other's minds. This is accomplished by allowing their Lothians to directly touch and mingle into one. This is the Lothian act of mating, and produces a new Lothian of composite memories, do

you see? It is also the Arath mating act, in a more profound sense, for it brings about a total intimacy of minds.

"Now you do not possess a Lothian, so I am not proposing that act for you. Nor do I share sufficient intimacy with any of my men here to desire to produce a Lothian for you. Besides, that would serve to give you all my memories and give me nothing of yours in exchange—only those, which I hardly need, of one of my own men, who has seen little more and possibly less than I.

"What I propose is an act of much greater rarity: that you and I should sit in close proximity and allow my Lothian to span the gap between us, situating itself within us both to link our minds in common memory." He paused, wound down. "Well, what do you think?"

"I am uneasy," the human said. "I cannot help but be. What does this, this 'Lothian' *do* in my body? Will it do damage? How do I know it will withdraw? Besides which, do I *want* the contents of your mind—or to give you mine?"

"I can reassure you at least about the Lothian," Lorex replied, feeling unaccountably nervous and tense. Was he worried that the human might reject his offer—*or that he would accept?* "Loroloth is protoplasmic and gains entrance to your body through your pores. He disrupts nothing. Your body will feel no differently, and will suffer no harm of any sort. He must return to my body, else we would be bound to each other like unnatural twins."

"But this sharing of memories," insisted the human. "How dangerous is it?"

"I don't know," said Lorex.

"Isn't it selfish of you," spoke up Cilla, "to want to do this instead of crossing a desert? You'll have each other's memories for the rest of your life."

She surprised him. He hadn't expected her to speak up at all, much less to what was undoubtedly his weakest, most dubious point. "This desert, girl, could *end* my life,

if Makstarn is to be believed. Which then, is the greater price?" He switched tactics and returned his attention to the man:

"Do not consider my memories lightly, young man. They won't be a poor bargain. You'll find therein the answers to many questions—questions you've only just begun to ask. Am I right?" He elicited a startled nod from Makstarn. "Because of my access to Loroloth's memories, born of the Lothians of my mother and father, I have access to *their* memories, and their *Lothian's* memories, and so forth back along the long chain of my ancestors and the Lothian of other worlds. It is a rich heritage and it will inform you on much you've not yet dreamed of in this universe! I shall be handing you the most precious gift possible: knowledge, knowledge which will be uniquely yours among all your humankind!"

"Is my knowledge of Shanathor that valuable, then?" asked the human.

"No," Lorex admitted. "But I sense that you are so much more than you outwardly appear to be, and your secret might be as valuable in the balance."

"You will have access to all my mind, then? All the thoughts I have ever thought?"

"Yes," Lorex replied. "But that and nothing more. I shall know no more than you yourself know about yourself."

"That's little enough," Makstarn said. The human shrugged. "Very well, then. Let's get on with it."

# Chapter 18

They each stripped to the waist, Makstarn and Lorex. Then they sat down upon the ground not far from the fire, their backs to each other. Lorex held his wings outspread, then relaxed them against the ground, unfolded. Makstarn leaned back and felt the warm, slightly sweaty flesh of the winged man against his own. Strangely feathered muscles throbbed with a life of their own against his shoulder blades, and Lorex's spine felt like a protruding toothed ridge against his own. The Arath's body felt light—almost hollow—and insubstantial. Makstarn was almost afraid to lean back with all his weight; he felt he might crush the other.

The skin of his back began to build that same slow tingie with which he had sensed the intermingling of his self with another's—but this time would be different, he knew. This time it would not be the exchange of dimly-perceived shapes of feelings. This time it would be *thoughts*, actual thoughts and memories, as crystalline as his own. He wondered if he would survive such an experience. *Could* he survive? Could any man?

The only observer was Cilla, who sat a short distance away from the two firelit figures. The other Arath were sleeping in the nearby trees. But she could see nothing that was happening to them, nothing but two motionless bodies.

Had she been able to watch from a much closer position, she might have seen a film appear for a moment along the edges where their backs joined like the edge of a compressed bubble. But what she could not have seen under any circumstances was the outflowing of a grayish-pink substance which found its way out of the pores of the Arath's back and into the pores of the human's. Nor could she possibly have seen the filament-like strands of this same grayish protoplasm penetrating the body of the man who had so recently become her first lover—tracing out his neural system, cojoining it, becoming simultaneous with it.

She could only remain where she was, and watch two silent, motionless figures washed by flicking firelight, and wait. . . .

The fire was only embers when Makstarn opened his eyes and knew that he was once more sitting here on solid earth, his back to his Arath brother.

Slowly, with the pain of long-cramped muscles and the fluidity of an Arath, he leaned forward, breaking the contact which had sustained him for all these lifetimes. He was separate once more.

He turned and looked at Lorex, who had also turned. They regarded each other for a long moment, their eyes locking. Lorex smiled wisely and Makstarn nodded. "I must be alone for a while," he said.

"I understand," Lorex said.

"Do *you* understand me better?" Makstarn asked.

Lorex first began to shake his head, but then he nodded. "I don't know," he said. "I can't be sure."

"I do," said Makstarn.

"Yes," Lorex agreed. "That is why you must go and be alone."

Makstarn looked at Cilla, fallen asleep in a hunched-over, huddled position. "She waited for me," he said.

With Lorex he stretched her out, not awakening her, and covered her against the pre-dawn chill. As he did so,

he looked up into Lorex's eyes again. "You know this part too," he said.

"I treasure it," Lorex said. "Yours is something unique in all my knowledge and memory—as you must surely know, now."

"There's so much—!"

"Take your time. It won't go away."

"No," Makstarn agreed. "I shall never forget."

With the wolf at his heels, Makstarn struck off through the forest. He followed the path taken by the Arath from the road, and passed by the empty house where he'd first met them. Then, westward on the road a short distance, to a meadow. The Arath had stopped here at its edge the night before their meeting, and Lorex had particularly enjoyed the coming of early dawn there. Makstarn knew that he too would, also.

He had so much to think about—right now he felt dazed, buffeted, and yet at once curiously excited and at peace with himself. Emotions battled each other within him.

He passed by the trampled and charred place where the Arath had made their camp and found another place more to his liking on the rise of a low knoll, facing east. Here the grass was ripe and brown, and he got down on his hands and knees and turned about three times before settling himself, pulling the dirskin over him and facing the pale-streaked sky of dawn.

There he sat for a very long time, while the sun appeared as streaks of fire through the close horizon of trees, then rose overhead. As he sat, he tried to bring peace to his mind by quieting all thoughts and remaining a passive receptacle for sensation. He tried to release all thoughts and become only experience: The experience of his eyes, watching the rising sun and shifting shadows and colors. The experience of his ears, listening to the myriad sounds, from the breezes that ran through the grass and then the distant trees, to the insects buzz-

ing in the thickening air, to the birdsongs which rose and fell, to the events which went on about him, like the awaking snort of Luuk and his pad-swish in the grass as he stalked off for game or play, depending on his luck . . . The experience of his nose, smelling each fresh scent wafted to him by vagrant breezes . . . the musty sweetness of the crushed dry grass under him . . . Then experience of his skin, registering each variation in the movement of the air, the tickling sensation of the grass, the precision and confusion of an insect attempting to negotiate his shoulder . . . He strove to become a passive part of his environment, knowing that in this way he might find the calmness of mind to become fully himself once more.

It was not easy. Each image he saw summoned up scores of others. The rising sun: He saw it all, as clearly as if super-imposed upon his retinas, from space, rising over the edge of the disk-like planet below—*this planet* —and from that image followed a welter of others, of solar exploration, of sunspots, of other stars, of galactic space travel—

—And on, until he could take no more and was jarred back into an awareness of where he was, and tried to reassert himself, to return his attention to the morning meadow.

And so it went: each would-be familiar sight became a reinforcing battery of memories of related sights and subjects. He could not turn his thoughts away from the process entirely, and each occasion taught him something about the world which surrounded him, but he continued to fight down this vast well-spring of knowledge, to concentrate upon the *now* of the *here* and thus regain serenity.

It finally came to him not long before sunset. He was lying on his back, staring into the sky, lying in the shadow of the late afternoon. He sat partway up, bringing his gaze level with the close horizon, and felt for an exalted moment as though he was perched upon a hill that

overlooked all the world, fallen away out beyond his feet.

He stared wide-eyed about him. The band of trees that marked the meadow's edge was splashed with a green of impossible richness. Above, the sky was purple and gold. Closer at hand, tall grass waved everywhere, and—darting and dancing in and out among the grass tops, were hundreds and yet more hundreds of flying insects. *Their movements were precisely geometric.* It seemed to him that he had opened his eyes a little more widely than ever before, had changed their focus in some subtle new way, and had become able to see an invisible world which overlapped the visible. These insects, now: They seemed to move in a single narrow stratum of air, that stratum located from a point about a hand's width below the highest grass tops, to a point about two hands breadths above them. Within this stratum, the blurry black dots seemed to move in perfect, intricately curved paths which constantly interwove with those around them and became a pattern of incredible complexity. He was viewing this plane of activity, he realized, because he was sitting with his eyes directly centered within it. He pushed himself higher with his elbows, straightening his back, and raised his eyes into the next higher stratum.

Here the vibrating black dots were larger, fewer, their dances more sprawling, wider-looping. Here an occasional distant bird would glide down to sweep into and join the insects' dance. He marvelled at the differences in the very feel of the air itself, as he tested it with his nose and tongue, up here on this new plane.

He went higher.

Here the birds flew freely, lighting in treetops and then taking off again to sweep and swerve across the sky.

Higher: among the dusk-washed clouds, cold and misty among their blue-dark shadows, warm and golden in the last gleaming spoke-like beams of sunlight.

He looked down, then, and saw far below him his

body. Lying beside it, close against it, was the body of Luuk. Thrown out from them was the apron of dirskin.

He went higher.

*"Father—is it really you?"*

*A shimmering presence: "Hello my son."*

*"I've come such a long, long way to find you."*

*"We met once before."*

*"That—wasn't the same."*

*"No."*

*"I—I didn't do what you told me to do."*

*"You were lucky."*

*"I could not kill the wolf. He was a part of me."*

*"So am I."*

*"I—I don't understand."*

*"You found me here. How?"*

*"I'm not sure. Instinct?"*

*"We are linked, you and I, Makstarn. By circumstance and by coincidence. Never were father and son more greatly separated by poles of experience and the realms of the physical."*

*"Explain it to me."*

*"Not now. You have come here too soon. In this—place—you are an intruder."*

*"Father! You cannot deny me now! I have spent my whole life trying to know you, to find you. I have left my mother and my mother's people, journeyed through the lands of hell, and seen the spectre of Death—seeking you!"*

*"Seeking me—or knowledge?"*

*"How could I seek the one without the other?"*

*"How have you come here?"*

*"You must know; you came here yourself."*

*"Ah, but I have cast aside my physical body and renounced my humanity. Have you?"*

*"Renounced your humanity? What do you mean, Father?"*

*"You know not the meaning of this place, do you, Son? Nor the way in which it is customarily gained?"*

*"No. I followed you."*

*"I must be forgiven my remaining human aspect—my curiosity. I knew it would play me false. But—you are my only son. And when I sensed you to be close to death, I took the chance."*

*"You did come to me then—in the desert!"*

*"In a vision, yes. And somehow left a spore for you to follow?"*

*"Perhaps you owe me an explanation, Father. I know much more now than I ever did—I know about the Arath, the Lothian and space-travel, and physics and—and yet I know also that I am unique among me. Why? You are the answer, Father. Tell me the truth."*

*"What is 'the truth'? That I too was unique in your world, and that you are my offspring? Or would you prefer a more universal truth—that all men have within themselves the seeds of their own evolution into higher beings? Tell me the 'truth' you desire to know."*

*"All right, tell me this: You came out of the desert with a wolf into the land of my mother's people. Where did you come from, and where came the wolf?"*

*"It was an accident, Son. I was not born of your world—nor indeed, of your universe. Oh, the Arath are a clever lot, and the Lothian all the more so, but they are limited by their perceptions. You have learned so much—about very little. As the stars of your night time sky fill all the heavens, my son, so also is there an infinity of universes filling every moment of time, every dimension of space, and every aspect of life."*

*"And you come from another—universe?"*

*"Yes. I lived on a world called Earth, part of a race which called itself, Man."*

*"But we call ourselves Man, Father—"*

*"Everyone does."*

*"Oh."*

*"On that world, in that universe, I was a man not unlike any other man of that world. All men have within themselves the seeds of something more, A Next Step, to*

*something beyond Man. Few if any realize it until he finds himself becoming that which he was not."*

*"I don't understand. Are men then only the buds of blooms which will flower in this place?"*

*"So to speak, yes."*

*"But why have I never seen a man do this? Why do most men die, unflowered?"*

*"Each man dies many times, my son, in many different universes, before he, umm, 'flowers'. The cycle of life and death is a long upward evolutional path every man must tread. And before him, that which he calls 'lower life.'"*

*"The wolf, then: Luuk. He too?"*

*"All life, Son. Life is upward evolution."*

*"I thought life was entropic."*

*"Some of your Arath-Lothian knowledge again, I see. The term is meaningless. Life is not confined by the four-dimensional universe of matter, energy, space and time. Life—its total essence of which we are micro essential parts—exists outside entropy. Life has no origins, no conclusions: only an endless upward spiral along which we all must move."*

*"You dizzy me. Tell me about your world—and your wolf."*

*"The wolf was never a part of my world—he was born in, and died in yours."*

*"How did you come to my world, then?"*

*"As I said: by accident. I was still a young man when I found the Change upon me and I reached that turning point in my personal evolution whereat I became more than human. I was youthful and inexperienced, most of all in the responsibilities of this new maturity. I played with my newfound abilities and I attracted the attention of Others who had gone before me.*

*"They too lacked an awareness of the evolutional principles involved, and of their own responsibilities, either to themselves or to the Life Aspect. They had been human and they continued to think of themselves as human—with the added difference that their capabili-*

*ties were greater. They found themselves like gods among me, and they took such delight in this that they ignored their rightful places as god among gods.*

*"You might call it a case of arrested development. Their minds could not survive the transition from what they had been to what they should become. Like children in the bodies of grown men, their only desires were self-gratification . . .* childish *self-gratification. They corrupted themselves.*

*"Under the circumstances, they viewed newcomers to their state of existence as challenges—as threats."*

*"Were they then your world's rulers?"*

*"Yes, but not openly. They had made themselves immortal, and in earlier times had played openly the games of political conquest, but eventually it tired them. They had no awareness of their true life-span of freedom from their bodies and their world. They clung to their humanness, their bodies—and their fear of eventual death. By the time I knew them, they were motivated almost solely by fear.*

*"They feared me, and sought to destroy me. I had not imagined their existence, mind you! But that, you see, is how fear betrays one: they revealed themselves to me and forced me to defend myself. So doing, they forced upon me a battle which I had to win. Their own blindness and fear did them in.*

*"However, as part of the struggle, they tricked me into leaving my own universe, thinking to trap me, to seal me off without a way to return. They never realized that it was* they *who were sealed off, trapped, imprisoned, from the rest of the vaster life-universe. But then, at that time neither did I.*

*"So they tricked me into coming to your world, Son, in search of the woman who had been mine."*

*"Another woman—of your own world?"*

*"Yes. She was still human—mine before I outgrew my own humanity—and the attachment lingered. That was necessary; it was part of my own emotional growth towards an acceptance of my own responsibilities."*

*"You loved her?"*

*"Then, yes."*

*"And my mother—?"*

*"Let me answer you with a different question: This girl, Cilla—do you love her?"*

*"I—yes."*

*"And the wolf: Do you love him?"*

*"After our journey through the Shadow of Death? Yes—I cannot doubt it."*

*"So also this Arath, Lorex. You have shared his mind, his soul with him—more indeed than he imagines. How do you feel towards him?"*

*"I—yes, it is a love I feel. . . . I had not realized it before."*

*"I ask you, then: Do you love any of these three the less for the fact of the other two? Do you love them all, each in his or her way?"*

*"Yes."*

*"So also, then, I knew and loved both the woman of my world and your mother, Majra. But I knew your mother less long and less well."*

*"She remembers you still. She told me many long stories about you in my youth. She knows the stories you told her by heart."*

*"She told you then, that I found myself naked, alone and without extrahuman abilities in the eastern part of the desert you call the Great Desert? That I found for myself the ways of survival and befriended a wolf which I found there one night—?"*

*"She has told me all these things, but as she understands them, which is imperfectly—"*

*"But you do not really seek the details by which I learned to forage my food, the way in which I met my wolf, the places upon the road where I stubbed my feet, do you, Makstarn? These are pedestrian things, upon which you fixed your mind long ago when they seemed more important to you. Tell me the truth you really seek."*

*"The truth about myself."*
*"And fact, do you not know it already?"*

The shadows stretched out across the meadow and into the trees. The sky was streaked with dusk. Makstarn rose from the matted grass of the hillock, and roused Luuk. They took the road and then the path back to Lorex's encampment. As they entered it, the campfire's bright rays seemed to drive the last of the twilight from the sky, making a dome of cheery light in the night forest.

"Makstarn!" cried Cilla, leaping up from her work by the fire and running to him. "You—you're all right? Oh, I can see you are!" And she threw her small arms around his neck and hugged him, tears spilling onto his chest.

He closed his arms around her and held her close against him, shaping within his mind the images of love and warmth and gladness for her which he felt in his heart; then looked over her head to Lorex, who stood just beyond.

"You *are* all right," Lorex said.

"Yes. I have completed my quest."

Lorex's eyes widened. "You found your father's people?"

"I found my father."

"I don't understand."

"You will—some day."

"But—"

"I found myself, Lorex. And that led me to him."

Lorex grinned and shook his head. "I—I think I understand, but probably I don't."

"No matter. What of you? Have you satisfied yourself with the City of Shanathor?" He watched Lorex closely, wondering whether the Arath knew himself the reasons for his obsession with a city which could not possibly be the one he sought.

"Hmph? Oh—yes, a fascinating city, but not Shorgot."

"What will you do now? Where do you go?" This was

the key question: was Lorex aware of the monumentality of his mistake, or would his fear of the coastal villagers and his dislike of the coastal weather drive him ever-further from the truth?

"I believe I have made a mistake. It took the tumbling of my mind to shake free my awareness of it, but—" he grinned, ruefully, "the astrolabe was never one of my talents. . . ."

"You sailed to the wrong hemisphere," Makstarn said. "There was that map—"

"—In very old Kajar's room upon the wall! Yes! And when I reconcile your knowledge of this continent with it—"

"Shorgot lies far south," Makstarn said, nodding. "Thus perhaps we *have* solved each other's problems, after all. . . ."

"So it's southward we go," Lorex said. "Will you come with us?"

Makstarn looked down at Cilla. "What of you?" he asked her. "With whom will you go? Is your soul yet the First Captain's?"

She looked up at him and smiled and shook her head. "It is yours. I go where you go."

"The decision is yours, then," Lorex told him. "Will you join us?"

Would he? Makstarn felt the warmth of spirit in the girl he held so easily in his arms, knew the comradeship of the big gray wolf at his feet, and looked again at the winged man who stood before him, to whom he was tied by bonds more intimate than love. Shorgot? Why not? He was no longer bound to a compulsive and futile search for the secret of his own identity. That quest was over.

And the next—?

—Lay just beyond the next hill. "Yes," he said, feeling a new excitement begin to build within him. "We'll come with you."

**ALSO FROM LANCER, the book the science-fiction world is talking about and raving over:**

# PHOENIX PRIME

## BY TED WHITE

**LANCER BOOKS 74-593 75c**

**The dream of being a superman came true for Max Quest—and immediately turned into a nightmare.**

**He was not alone. There were Others with extraordinary powers, and the last thing they wanted was another superman on Earth—especially one working for good instead of evil.**

**They couldn't kill him. But they could send him . . . elsewhere.**

**Elsewhere was the viciously hostile world of Qanar, where Max's powers didn't work and sorcery was a more potent weapon than science, where shadows were as menacing as steel. Max Quest still had to save Earth from the corrupt threat of the Others—but he found his destiny intricately linked with that of Qanar as well. And somewhere in space-time was his lost love. . . .**

**A great science-fantasy novel by a powerful new writer!**

At your newsstand—or send 75¢, plus 10¢ for postage and handling, to: LANCER BOOKS, INC., 1560 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036.

**Also from Lancer—another great science-fiction novel by the writer everybody is talking about:**

# THE SORCERESS OF QAR

## by TED WHITE

**Lancer Books 74-592 75c**

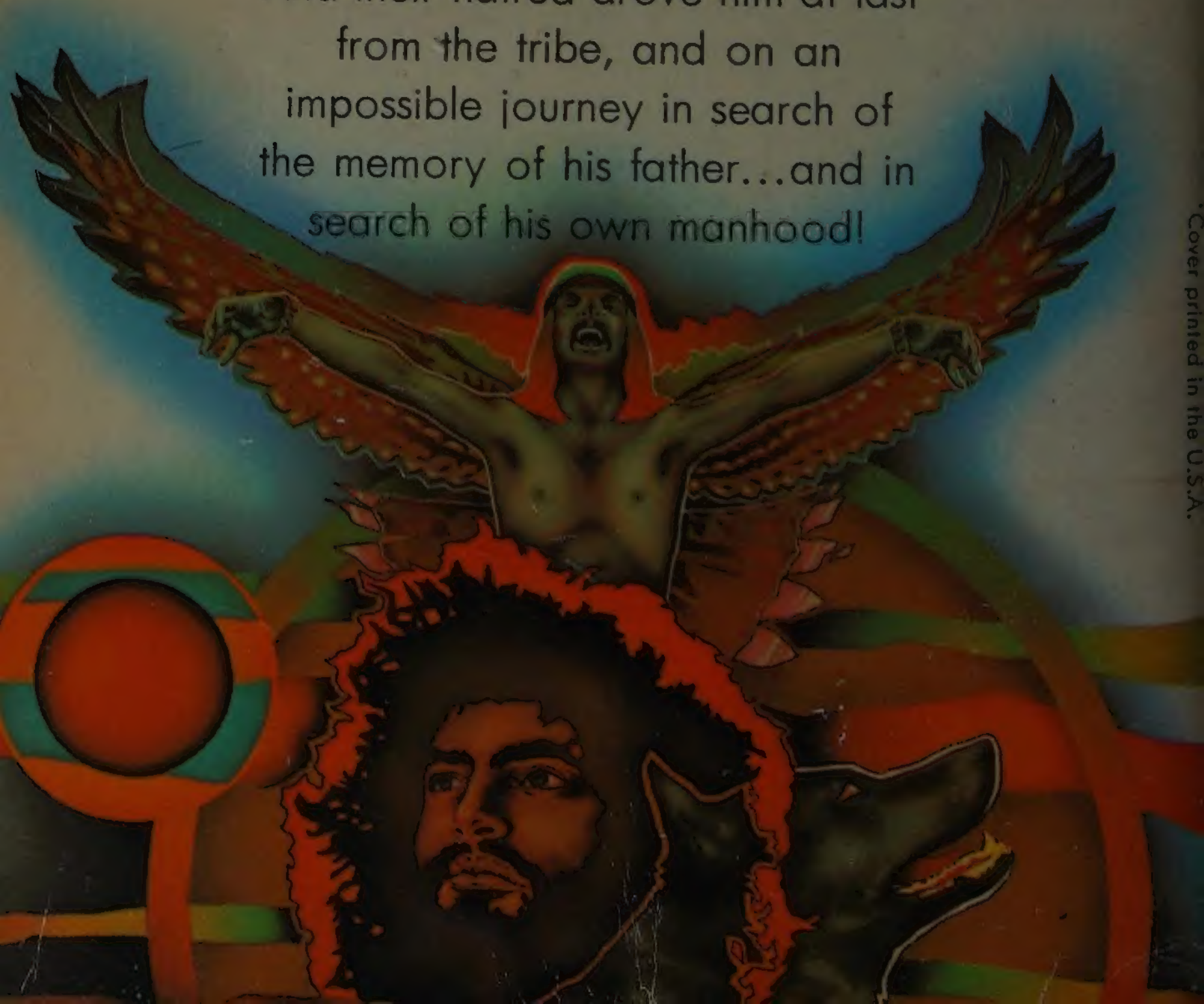
**Ted White again takes us to the strange, paradoxical world of Qanar, where a weird, age-old magic exists as everyday reality, side by side with the remnants of an equally ancient but less understood science. The alien "Others" are making a new bid to take over the entire planet . . . and only the noble Elron stands against them. But not entirely alone after he meets the beautiful Shannara, and she adds her limited psionic powers to his great strength to vanquish the enemy. Together they share an astounding Odyssey—through unpredictable matter transmitters and over treacherous terrain—to reach a hair-raising climax . . . IN THIS GREAT SEQUEL TO PHOENIX PRIME!**

At your newsstand—or send 75¢, plus 10¢ for postage and handling, to

LANCER BOOKS, INC.
1560 Broadway • New York, N.Y. 10036.

# MAKSTARN

was ugly, an outcast in the midst of the beautiful people of his tribe. Where they were tall and slender, he was short and squat. Where they were golden, touched with the beauty of the dawn, he was black and hairy...and hated by those of his own generation. It little mattered that the Elders respected him for what he was...and for what his father, Max Quest, had been; the young were all that mattered. And their hatred drove him at last from the tribe, and on an impossible journey in search of the memory of his father...and in search of his own manhood!



A LANCER SCIENCE FICTION ORIGINAL NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

Cover printed in the U.S.A.